Not Just in It to Win It:
Inclusive Game Play in an MIT Dorm

by

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ABSTRACT

The recent increase in digital gaming players and platforms does not imply that digital gaming is as inclusive as it could be. There are still gaps in participation that, if left unaddressed, will exclude groups who have been historically marginalized. Women are among those individuals most vulnerable to exclusion from gaming.

In order to better understand the motivations and practices of female players, this study focuses on a group of undergraduates at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who have created a community that plays digital and non-digital games together and includes women. The research was conducted over eight months using interviews and participant observations. The study concludes that there are interrelated factors at the group, game play, and individual levels that influence this particular community's inclusiveness. These factors include how the community values the play process over who wins or loses a game, uses games as facilitators of playful socializing, and negotiates their identities in relation to the "gamer" stereotype.

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INTRODUCTION

As digital gaming becomes more integrated into our lives, we must continually ask: Who is being left out and why? Gaming is an industry, a means of expression, a way to connect with people, and an engaging leisurely activity. Contrary to popular stereotypes, gaming has never been an activity just for kids. The number of us who play digital games is increasing. The types of games we play and the platforms we play them on are diversifying. This expansion, however, does not imply that digital gaming is as inclusive as it could be. There are still gaps in participation that, if left unaddressed, will exclude groups who have been historically marginalized.

Women are among those individuals most vulnerable to exclusion from gaming. This is not to say that women are not participating in gaming. Women have had a significant presence in some gaming contexts. What is problematic, as Bryce and Rutter (2002) have described, is that women are “rendered 'invisible' by male-dominated gaming communities, the games industry and academic research” (p. 244). This invisibility of female players helps to maintain the stereotype that digital gaming is “boy stuff” and, in turn, creates further obstacles to participation in digital gaming.

In this thesis, I shed light on this “invisible” group by exploring the motivations and practices of a group of undergraduates at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) who have

created a community that plays digital and non-digital games together and includes women, as well as students of different races and ethnicities[1] and players with different levels of gaming experience. My research, consisting of interviews and participant observations conducted between September 2009 and April 2010, indicates that there are interrelated factors at the group, game play, and individual levels that influence this particular community's inclusiveness.

Research background

This thesis was inspired by essays in the recent compilation *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008), which along with its predecessor from ten years prior, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998), contains much of the foundational thinking on female players and digital gaming[2]. Together, these books offer a number of useful research findings, conceptual frameworks for thinking about gender and gaming, and possible solutions for making digital gaming culture more inclusive of female players.

Two calls for further study in essays from these books guided my research. First, Elizabeth Hayes (2008) hypothesized in "Girls, Gaming, and Trajectories of IT Expertise" that playing and designing digital games may be a means for helping girls and young women become more interested in information technology. If validated, such a connection would be a significant finding because, as the opportunities for careers in technology are expanding, the role of

[1] I am not able to fully address issues of race, ethnicity, and game play in this thesis. The students I interviewed and observed were of diverse races and ethnicities. I will occasionally comment on the role of race or ethnicity in the community I studied in this thesis, but for more discussion of this topic see Everett & Watkins (2008).

[2] "Digital gaming" is an admittedly broad term. In this thesis, I mean for it to include video games on consoles, handhelds, and PC, as well as mobile games, online social games, and casual games. When distinctions between the various gaming platforms are required I employ more specific terms.

women in designing that technology has decreased over the past twenty years. The percentages of women earning computer science undergraduate and master's degrees have actually declined since the 1990s (National Science Foundation, 2009) and there is growing need to find ways to pique girls' interest in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). If playing and designing games could increase girls' technical interest and abilities, we would potentially have a way of addressing this gender disparity.

Before we can know whether or not girls' interest in IT fields increase when they play or design digital games, there is a need for more research about women who already play digital games – including what games they play, where and how they play, and their motivations for playing. T.L. Taylor (2008a) has called for this kind of research:

> Current women players are regularly seen as anomalies and not central research interests...What this means, however is that we tend to leave their pleasures, their strategies, their networks, their *play* always at the margins...They tell us a lot about the pleasures of game play and what it takes to get there. And for those interested in creating change, what better place to look than to the women and girls creating it now? (p. 56)

Taylor recognizes the lack of research focused on women who currently play digital games. It is not that women are not playing games, but that their participation is not seen as the norm and therefore not perceived as worthy of research. Taylor believes – as do I and many other games researchers – that there is still much to be learned about female players and that new knowledge about gender and gaming will also inform us about the kinds of pleasures games offer to all players. In my research, I took up this call to look where women are already participating in gaming.

Why MIT?

I began my search for female players in my immediate surroundings at MIT. I knew it was likely that at MIT – a school known for fostering the next generation of hackers, engineers, and scientists – there would be a significant population of young women who had sustained an interest in digital gaming through high school and into college. Of course, MIT undergraduates are not representative of average college students. Female undergraduates at MIT do, however, represent a kind of young woman that we can learn from in order to understand what motivates and sustains women's interest in digital gaming. Perhaps by better understanding the motivations, interests, and social context of these particular women, who are interested in gaming and technology (not necessarily because of each other), we can learn more about how to support girls' interest in technology in general.

Previous research on the culture surrounding media and technology at MIT has been done that helped position my work here. Sherry Turkle (1984; 1997) has conducted research on how the computer, as a projective and evocative medium, has influenced people's awareness of themselves and, in turn, how they think about culture. Her approach is a mix of ethnographic and psychoanalytic methods and it largely draws on cases studies and interviews with students and professors at MIT. She offers thoughts on the role of gender at MIT, which are, for the most part, related to how people approach computer programming.

Research on students' interactions with popular media on MIT's campus has also been done in at least two studies. Jenkins (1995) researched the "discursive context" of *Star Trek* viewers at

MIT (p. 215). While his study did not focus on gender, it did explore the motivations of students who watched the show, how it related to their own work in science and technology, and the criteria by which they evaluated the show and other works in the science fiction genre. Jenkins found that *Star Trek* played a significant role in how many of the students made sense of the role of science and technology in their own lives, as well as how they developed their own "professional ideology...as members of the scientific community" (p. 236). Jenkins' research offers a useful framework for evaluating the ways students make sense of media; yet, because it was based solely on interviews and focus groups, it did not adequately take into account the students' social context. Ford (2006) was able to provide some of this context when he studied media consumption patterns in an MIT dorm. While it is meant to be a more general study, Ford offered insight into how dorm life influenced MIT students' relationships with various media texts and platforms. These relationships were especially shaped by students' "lack of substantial private space" and the "limited resources available to them," which resulted in a fair amount of "media proselytizing" between students to share their tastes and interests in various media forms (p. 1).

It is important to note that dorm selection by students at MIT happens differently than at most other colleges. MIT's dorm selection process played a significant role in how the community that was the focus of my research was able to create its own culture around its shared interests and goals. Instead of being randomly assigned dorms, students at MIT are able to create living communities around shared interests or themes that can be cultivated over the time they are in school. These communities are able to form because students can stay in the same dorm rooms

from year to year, as well as decide how they will present their hall to incoming freshman students during dorm preview opportunities. Dorms, and even certain wings or halls, are known for themed living, such as the East Campus dorm, which attracts many engineers and "hackers;" or La Casa, which is a living community within the dorm New House that focuses on interests in Latino culture.

My findings from research among this particular community are deeply tied to its context at MIT, but there is still much to learn from these results about how we can more broadly make gaming participation more diverse. While it is important to remain aware of the community's particular circumstances, they are not the only factors that influence the inclusiveness of the community. These other factors are what I will present and examine in the following three chapters.

Gendering of digital games

A movement began around fifteen years ago in feminist studies of technology to recognize that technologies are "gendered," meaning they are produced and used in ways that embody the prevailing gender norms (Cockburn, 1992; Wajcman, 1991). This was a shift from the then popular view that technology autonomously affects its users. Wajcman (2010) has explained that instead of framing technology as "neutral or value-free," researchers began to recognize that "social relations (including gender relations) are materialised in tools and techniques" (p. 147). Technology to Wajcman includes the artifacts, as well as the knowledge of how to use them and the practices surrounding them; it is "a cultural product which is historically

constituted by certain sorts of knowledge and social practices as well as other forms of representation" (1991, p. 158).

The gendered understanding of the use and production of technologies is inextricably linked to hierarchical assumptions about skill and mastery and is intertwined with the gendering of computing in general. Turkle (1988) has studied male-dominated "hacker" culture at MIT for years, as well as women's "reticence" towards computing. Margolis and Fisher (2002) conducted a study of women in the computer science department of Carnegie Mellon University using a developmental framework that shows how perceptions of computing as "male territory" or "guy stuff" influence female participation from childhood to adulthood.

Corneliussen (2005) has moved this research beyond understanding computing as gendered to an understanding of how and why women find pleasure in computers even when they are "'the others' in relation to the masculine associations of computer technology" (p. 235). So we are moving from recognizing the often masculinized perceptions of computing and other technology to trying to understand why and how it is that women actually find a wide variety of pleasures in using computers, including forming social bonds and expertise around them.

Jenson and de Castell (2005) connect the gendering of computing to the gendering of digital games. They have stated that the trend in games studies of "essentializing" what is female in digital gaming "by no means originates with video game playing, but is indigenous to the culture of computing more generally and that this gendered computing culture always already

mediates girls' interactions with those technologies, among which game playing is only the most recent subject of attention" (p. 2). This statement ties gender and gaming issues into a larger cultural context that goes beyond simply figuring out what "girl games" should be like. I will then adopt an approach in this thesis much like the one I show that Corneliussen (2005) takes above. I am interested in moving beyond the recognition that digital gaming is often perceived as "guy stuff" and on to exploring what pleasures motivate and what social contexts sustain female players.

Also, it is worth mentioning that digital games are not gendered in the same way across all platforms and genres. Social context helps people make sense of whether they think girls should play a Nintendo DS, or if a Sony PS3 is made for boys. The Electronic Software Association (2009) has claimed that "40% of all players are women," suggesting that female players have achieved a state of near parity with their male counterparts (p. 3). But breaking down that percentage by platform, age, and genre show that there are wide gaps between male and female participation in many areas of gaming. Jenson and de Castell (2005) have criticized the use of large-scale quantitative studies to examine gender and gaming for obscuring variations in participation between male and female players:

> [S]tatistics like these are used to dismiss the question of gender and computer game playing from the outset (it is no longer a "problem" since so many more women are indicating that they are playing). Once gender has been excised as statistically insignificant, there is typically no further gender-based disaggregation of data, even when it might seem that statistically relevant distinctions should be made with respect to game preferences and time on the game. (p. 3)

Smaller-scale qualitative research, such as this thesis, strengthens our understanding of how broad statistics break down in tangible gaming contexts, on diverse gaming platforms, and by

demographics such as age, race and ethnicity, and class.

Previous research on female players

There is a growing body of research on gender and gaming in addition to the two *Barbie to Mortal Kombat* books. This research has tended to focus on certain aspects of gaming, especially gaming by young girls, online gaming, and designing games for female players, and it has left multiple areas unexplored and open to further discoveries.

Research on female players to date focuses mostly on school-aged girls. This research has contributed to the understanding of the importance of access to gaming technology, the complex negotiations of gender performance that sometimes occur when girls play digital games, and the role of discourse that goes on around game play (de Castell, Boschman, & Jenson, 2009; Orr Vered, 1998; Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2007; Walkerdine, 2006). While these studies have contributed significant findings, one common aspect to note is that most of these studies took place in after-school settings that were created by the researchers. These controlled-context studies may have produced different understandings of how girls play games than studies that were less manipulated. There is a need for further research that looks at game play in living spaces, where it most often occurs.

The strong interest in learning and digital games has skewed the literature on gender and gaming so that younger ages are overrepresented, leaving a gap in research on female adult players. The research that does exist on women has most often been studies of women playing

online – in virtual worlds, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG's), and causal games (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Juul, 2010; Pearce, 2009; Taylor, 2006). While this research has been helpful in examining how and why women play, there is more research needed to understand women's offline digital gaming practices and the influence of social context for co-located gaming, i.e. when they are playing with other players in the same physical space.

There has been a promising shift in the past few years to recognize the importance of social context in situations where girls and women play digital games (Beavis & Charles, 2007; Carr, 2005; Lin, 2008; Taylor, 2006). Analyzing the structural elements and content of digital games are certainly key to understanding how women make sense of digital games, but excluding contextual factors – such as who the game is being played with, where it is being played, and why it is being played – can lead to prescriptive thinking about how game design influences the behavior of players. Taylor (2008b) has proposed that "[r]ather than seeing *actual* players and their activity as a kind of sidebar (or metaconstruct) to an investigation of games, I would suggest that critical games studies need to take into serious account the intersection of structure *and* player culture" (p. 124). Researchers are recognizing that strictly studying games as systems of rules leaves out the important factors that the players bring to the games, which influence how the games are played.

Two studies were particularly helpful for understanding how some women play in co-located contexts. The first study, conducted by Kerr (2003), was one of the few that has discussed

women's personal histories with gaming. Kerr found two major factors that influenced how and why women participated in gaming culture were access to “an 'offline' social network of players and player visibility” and the “range and quality of games” (p. 279). While Kerr's study offered a deeper understanding of women and their identities in relation to playing games, it did not explore the social contexts in which the women's gaming actually took place. Thornham (2008) has been one of the few researchers to analyze the contexts of co-located console gaming for women. She conducted an ethnographic study of eleven British households – most of which were co-ed groups of young adults – and their gaming practices. She discovered a complicated discourse that existed around gaming that embodied the players' existing conceptions of gender roles. In addition to discourse, she found that notions of gender roles influenced how people played games, noting, “[i]ndeed, it is not just a case of what they’re supposed to say, it is also how they’re supposed to game which is the issue” (p. 139). Thornham's observations in this study were able to show how deeply intertwined the social context can become with game play in a domestic setting.

In this thesis, I build on Thornham's work, researching another group of male and female digital game players to better understand their motivations and practices. However, I do not want my research on this group to be strictly focused on social context. Instead my approach is three pronged: 1) I look at the social dynamics and interactions of the group of students in the dorm lounge to see how playing games fit into their larger network of relationships and activities; 2) I focus on the multiplayer games that were played in the lounge to better understand how their structural elements and content helped facilitate the social goals of the group; and 3) I take up

the individual members' gaming histories, motivations, and playing styles to show how they intersected and diverged from each other over time. The players were in some ways very similar, but they also represented a diverse group of experiences and preferences that were situated in and influenced by their specific contexts. It is my intention to analyze the interviews and observations from this community at MIT through these three lenses in order to arrive at a fuller picture of how social context, game structure, and the individual players interacted and influenced one another.

Defining *Play* and *Games*

In this thesis, I often distinguish between *play* and *game* to capture different approaches to interacting with games. Roughly, I use the word *play* to refer to the actions of those who primarily enjoy the process of a game (regardless of who wins or loses) and the word *game* to refer to the approach in which winning is the main goal of the activity. The question of how these terms ought to be defined is well-covered territory in games studies literature, and I do not wish here to propose new definitions of either term. Instead, for reasons discussed in this section, I will adopt definitions that have been proposed by Salen and Zimmerman (2004).

Early research

The two most-cited technical distinctions between play and game in games studies are from Huizinga (1955) and Caillois (1975). Huizinga (1955), a Dutch cultural historian, was one of the first thinkers to recognize the role of play in the development of culture. In his book, *Homo Ludens,* he asserts that play is a free activity outside of ordinary life, not serious, absorbing, has no material interest or profit gained, occurs in its own time and space, has fixed rules, and

promotes social groupings that are often surrounded by secrecy (p. 13). Caillois (1975) builds off of Huizinga's work on play, but is more focused on games. He praises Huizinga for his attempt to define the characteristics of play and for recognizing play's role in the development of culture, but he believes the Huizinga's definition is "at the same time too broad and too narrow" (p. 4). Caillois develops a framework for categorizing games that includes four types: *agon* – competitive games; *alea* – games of chance; *mimicry*- make believe; and *ilinx* – physical games that "attempt to destroy the stability of perception" (p. 23). These four types can be combined with two more general categories, *ludus* and *paidia*, to form a matrix of categorization. For Caillois, play and games fall on a scale between paidia and ludus, the former having few rules and the latter being more structured. He explains that ludus "is complementary to and a refinement of paidia, which it disciplines and enriches" (p. 29).

Caillois' conceptions of play and game are important because many current researchers use them as foundations for their own definitions or categorizations. While his ideas are popular, they are also problematic because they include a particular normative assumption according to which play is subordinate to games, as shown in the quote above. Caillois first recognizes a "complementary" relationship between paidia and ludus, but then goes on to ascribe qualities to ludus that "discipline" and "enrich" paidia. This subordination of play-like activities to game-like activities is important to recognize because it can lead to the gendering of playful practices as feminine, which can create boundaries within the digital gaming industry, games research, and the culture surrounding digital games.

Fron, Fullerton, Ford, Morie, and Pearce (2007) propose that "[t]oday's hegemonic game industry has infused both individuals' and societies' experiences of games with values and norms that reinforce investments in a particular definition of games and play, creating a cyclical system of supply and demand in which alternate products of play are marginalized and devalued" (p. 309). If feminized play practices are devalued by game developers, for example, they might be neglected in the digital game market. This would limit the choices that female players have, adding to a cycle of exclusion of female players from some gaming participation.

Assumptions about the subordination of the feminized play to masculinized games are also found in discourse around play as a developmental stage of childhood. For instance, developmental psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim, (1987) explains play and games as two different developmental stages, the former being "characterized by freedom from all but personally imposed rules (which are changed at will), by free-wheeling fantasy involvement, and by the absence of any goals outside of the activity itself," and the latter being more competitive and "characterized by agreed-upon, often externally imposed, rules, by a requirement to use the implements of the activity in the manner for which they are intended and not as fancy suggests, and frequently by a goal or purpose outside the activity, such as winning the game" (p.42-43). For Bettelheim, play is done for "pure enjoyment" while games can often involve stress (p. 43). Similar to Caillois' categorizations of paidia and ludus, Bettelheim distinguishes between play and games, framing play as a precursor and less-developed stage to games. In doing this he reinforces a hierarchy of games as more advanced than play, which perhaps is still present in the devaluation of more open-ended games.

Reflecting on the work of Piaget, Bettelheim establishes that play is an important stage of learning how things work, including the rules of games, but also how to interact socially or to deal with complex emotions. Play, seen in this way, is productive and an important and necessary compliment to games. But instead of holding these stages in equal regard, he claims that play is a less "mature" phase of development, which leads to a more "civilized" stage of games (p. 42). Apart from being factually groundless, these normative assumptions exclude likely scenarios in which, play and games are valued equally or the value relationship is reversed. Play is again de-valued, even though it is a necessary process for learning the rules of a game.

Working definitions

For the purposes of my research – a starting assumption of which was that the value of different approaches to games is an open question – I sought a distinction between play and game in which the former was not automatically subordinated to the latter. After discussing the history of the terms at length, Salen and Zimmerman (2004), in their book *Rules of Play*, have offered a distinction that does not import the normative assumptions that create a hierarchy between the two notions. They proposed the following definitions:

- A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome (p. 80).
- Play is free movement within a more rigid structure (p. 304).

Many other languages do not distinguish between the words play and game, but Salen and Zimmerman believe that the separation of the words play and game in English is an opportunity

“to consider games and play as two separate ideas with related, but distinct meanings” (p. 72). I employ this separation used by Salen and Zimmerman in my thesis to distinguish between groups of players that focus on the process of playing games rather than the end results of games.

Salen and Zimmerman's definitions are broad enough to cover a wide range of understandings of play and game, but there is a potential complication with their definition of game that I would like to address before moving forward. In their definition of game, Salen and Zimmerman create a boundary around what is and is not a game based on whether or no there is a “quantifiable outcome,” or, in other words, a goal that is clearly discernible. And they are not the only researchers to include this type of criterion in their definition. Jesper Juul (2005) created the diagram (Figure 1) as part of the *Classic Game Model* to help delineate what fell within his understanding of game (p. 23).

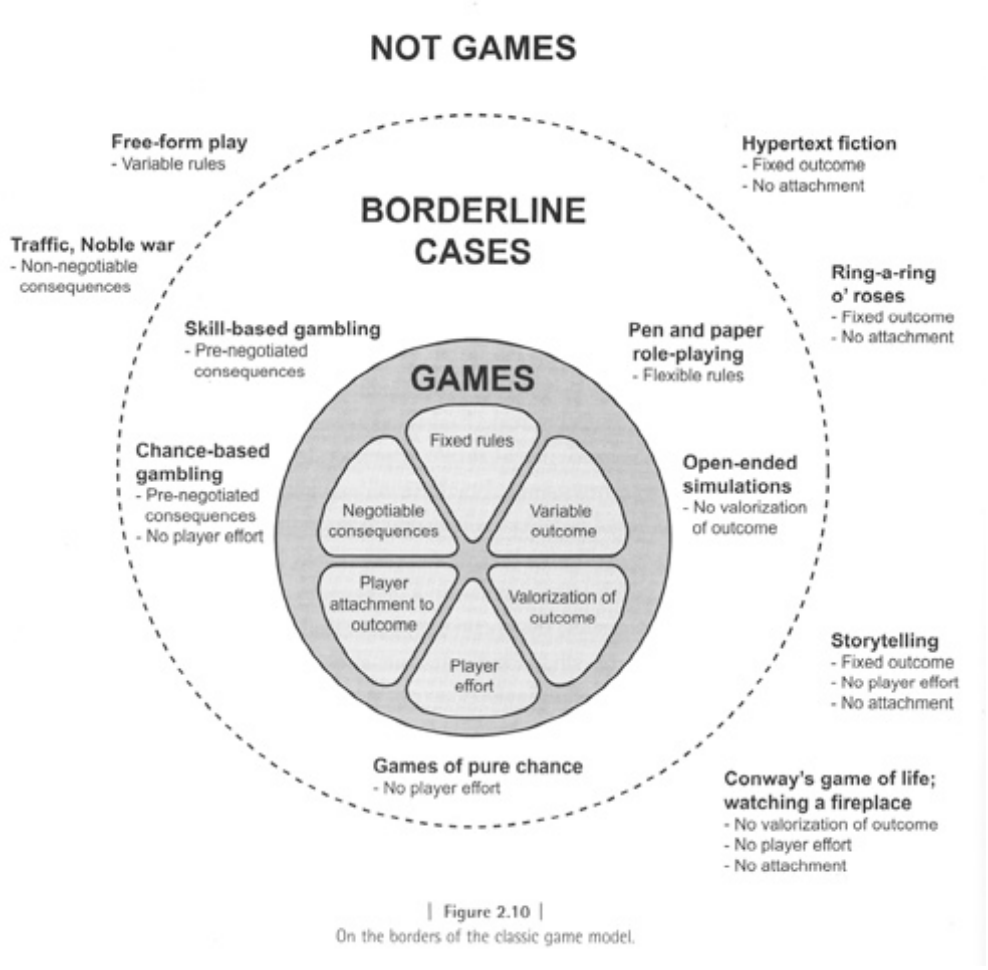

Figure 1 - Juul's *Classic Game Model* (2005, p. 23).

This rigid criterion – related to the presence or absence of outcomes in games – is narrower than many popular conceptions of the term game, such that it prevents activities which we normally consider games from being included in research. For example consider games like *The Sims*[3] and *Farmville*[4], which are less formally goal-driven than most games, and both of which are played predominantly by women (Gross, 2010; West, 2008). Under Juul (2005) and Salen

[3] Throughout this thesis, I offer descriptions of the digital games that are key to illustrating my arguments. *The Sims* is a popular life-simulation game that was originally created for PC's and later became available on consoles.

[4] *Farmville* is a game played on the social network Facebook. Players create farms, grow crops, take care of animals, and interact with other people in their network who play the game.

and Zimmerman's (2004) definitions, these games are “border-line” or “limit cases” because their goals are more often individually or socially defined than programmed into the game. With this conceptual exclusion, there is a practical risk that certain players will not be seen as participating in gaming culture – and that they might be excluded from the scope of research in game studies.

As part of the “Introduction” to an issue of *Feminist Media Studies* (Arthurs & Zacharias, 2007), three games researchers, Mia Consalvo, Sara M. Grimes, and Helen W. Kennedy, discussed the gendering of play as feminine and games as masculine. Kennedy first states, “[t]he dominant definitions of what counts as games often exclude precisely the sites where girls (or women) are most visible and active...these kinds of playful technologies are frequently ignored in theorising about games and gamers” (p. 106). Grimes acknowledges Caillois' problematic distinction between paidia and ludus as *“*a particularly apt example of male-centricity in the play literature. I couldn't help but feel that his concept of paidia, if better developed, actually corresponds to many games that are traditionally coded as 'feminine'; his subordination of 'paidia' to 'ludus' -- 'instrumental,' 'civilising' play, is particularly problematic from this perspective” (p. 108). Grimes adds that *The Sims* and other games that are more open-ended are called “boundary” games in Juul's model “exactly because they exceed the dominant conceptualisations of games/gameplay/gameplay pleasures. So the pleasure aspect of abandonment, purposelessness, or even social play practices is disavowed” (p. 109). Grimes and Kennedy capture how research that relies too heavily on a strict definition of games as “goal-oriented” can leave entire groups of players – in this case, women and men who play

more open-ended games – out of our understanding of what makes gaming pleasurable.

Towards the end of the conversation Consalvo summarizes the risks of exclusive terminology: “I think it's useful to remember that just as we find terminology helpful in ordering our thinking, our thinking can all too easily be ordered by our terms. Naming and defining are ideological, and can shut down understandings just as they allow others, and we need to be vigilant in seeing just how we are going about defining and naming what we are trying to study” (p. 109). I am sympathetic to Consalvo's critique that the way game is defined has potential to shape the scope of research for game studies. We must be careful not to conflate what we consider valid subjects of research with certain concepts within game studies – especially when doing so could reduce the sphere of research and exclude valuable topics. But distinctions like those made by Salen and Zimmerman can still be useful for categorizing approaches to games – and even broadening the scope of game studies to include more subjects.

Until recently for example, “goal-oriented” games and their players have been the predominant subjects of research in game studies. There is a need to broaden the focus of study to include more playful activities and those who participate in playful activities. It is my position that game studies ought to include goal-oriented and non-goal-oriented games. But even, articulating this basic thesis depends on a conceptual distinction between the two types of approaches to gaming. While I agree with Consalvo that we want to be aware of the influence of our terms, I view the Salen and Zimmerman distinction as valuable for achieving the end we both desire: greater inclusiveness in games studies. By addressing this issue explicitly early on in my thesis, I

hope to reduce the likelihood that my adoption of Salen and Zimmerman's distinction – and specifically their definition of game – will be interpreted as a move to restrict the scope of game studies.

In this thesis, rather I use Salen and Zimmerman's definitions as tools to examine the relationship between inclusion and a particular community's emphasis on the play process over who wins the game to create a more inclusive gaming context. The distinction made by Salen and Zimmerman between play and games based on whether there is a quantifiable goal or not is instrumental to establishing my distinction in Chapter One of describing the group of students I researched as a *play community* rather than a *gaming community.* This move is extremely helpful to identifying the factors that promote inclusiveness, which could have utility in game studies as a discipline.

Research Questions

My research questions for this thesis evolved to reflect the exploratory process I underwent. I began my research interested in the motivations and practices of female undergraduates who played digital games on campus at MIT. Knowing little of dorm life or gaming activities on campus, I decided to create questions that were broad enough to lead to a general understanding of what digital gaming by female players looked like at MIT:

- *What are female MIT undergraduates' motivations for playing digital games?*
- *What are the games that women play in person with others on MIT's campus?*
- *How and where do women at MIT play digital games?*
- *What is the criteria by which undergraduate female students determine what is a "game" and who is a "gamer"?*

These questions were the basis of my initial exploratory interviews with female undergraduates on campus. As I will discuss below, these interviews led me to locate a research site, which was a dorm lounge that served as the social hub for a community in which several women played digital and non-digital games with male students. Upon locating this community, I adapted my research questions to include the social context of the research site:

- *What factors contribute to making a group's gaming activities inclusive of different skill levels, gender, and play experiences?*

When I started visiting the research site, it was obvious that the group was diverse in terms of gender and player experiences. This secondary research question was intended to expand the scope of my research to include the social dynamics of the group and their specific gaming preferences and interactions.

Methods

This description of my research methods is meant to give the reader a sense of the ever-evolving process that I went through to refine and narrow my thesis' focus over the course of a year. What began as a general interest in the relationship between gender and gaming ended up as a small-scale ethnography of a community who plays games together in the 5N lounge of an MIT dorm. (5N refers to the dorm's floor and wing where the lounge is located.) This group was chosen because of the participation of several women who had histories of playing digital games before entering college, as well as women who were more recently introduced to digital gaming or did not play digital games at all. The research for this thesis can best be understood in two parts: first, as a series of exploratory interviews to understand how women play digital games on campus, and second, as a focused study of a research site that included participant

observations and subsequent, detailed interviews.

I started my research process by interviewing several undergraduate women. My methods for selecting women to interview were varied. First, I reached out via email to several male and female students whom I had met at the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab, which was where my graduate student office was located at the time. I also sent an email to the Assassins' Guild, a live-action role-playing group on campus asking them to forward my request to interview women who played digital games on campus. This initial contact led me to schedule a first round of interviews with three female students.

I conducted interviews in public locations on campus, usually at the Student Center, and I recorded the audio for transcription. The style of the interviews was informal and conversational. I usually began by asking the interviewee to tell me about her history with gaming. The interviewee knew that I was mostly interested in digital games, so non-digital gaming did not come up very often. I then would ask about the current games that she played, how she played them, and why she liked them. If interesting moments were mentioned, especially where gender was obviously a factor, I would ask her to go into more detail. I also asked each interviewee to talk about why she decided to come to MIT and how she defined the terms “game” and “gamer.”

After this initial round of interviews, I learned that most of the digital gaming on campus happened in dorms. My first interviewee, Lisa, who would become my main informant, invited

me to come play games with her at her dorm. This is when I first encountered my research site, the 5N dorm lounge. As I mentioned above, during my first visits to 5N in October and November 2009, I was impressed by the diversity of the group playing digital games in the lounge. As a result of these visits, I decided to conduct *participant observations* over the next six months to better understand the social dynamics of the group and their gaming practices (Gray, 2003, p. 83). I visited the dorm lounge one to two times each month, usually in the evenings, to play games and socialize with the group. This was usually a Thursday, Friday, or Saturday night, as these were the most popular nights for students to visit the lounge and play games.

During visits, I took few notes and instead tried to participate as much as possible in the activities that took place in and around the dorm lounge. These included: playing video and card games, socializing and joking around, eating, and watching a movie. I also conducted interviews with more students who participated in activities in the lounge. I found these students through recommendations of other students or by approaching them myself in the lounge. These interviews were structured similarly to what I describe above, but also included specific questions about the group in the 5N lounge, including how it came to be and how it currently functions. At the time, I also conducted interviews with three more female undergraduates who were not affiliated with the lounge. I located these students by emailing my request for interviews to several dorms' student government members who forwarded it to their dorm email lists.

After each visit to the 5N lounge, I recorded field notes on my computer. I also transcribed the

interviews that I conducted, which I eventually coded in order to find emergent themes for analysis. I used these field notes and interview transcripts to shape my analysis for this thesis. If I found areas where I needed more information, I was able to follow up via email or Facebook with my interviewees to gather more information.

Background of the research site

The community that gathered in the 5N[5] lounge began to form in September 2009. Around this time, the core group – who were freshman at the time – befriended each other at an orientation event before dorm selection took place. They coordinated their top housing picks and were able to live in the same dorm. They were even able to find rooms on the same floor: 5N.

I interviewed five students from this group of friends – who at the time of my research were sophomores:

- **Lisa** is a comparative media studies major who was my first interviewee and became my main informant. She is one of the few students with her own PS3, making her room another hub of gaming in the dorm.
- **Pat** is a very social chemical engineering major who loves to play role-playing games (RPG) and is considered by some to be the leader of the 5N bunch.
- **Jason** is a double major in material science and engineering and comparative media studies who also plays digital games at the newspaper office on campus.

[5] The names of the dorm floor and the students have all been changed to protect the identity of the subjects.

- **Mei** is a management science major whose Wii was used to start the gaming in 5N. This past semester though she has been hanging out less in the lounge and more with her boyfriend and his friends at the other end of the hall.
- **Rachel** is a double major in economics and management science who loves *Pokemon* and MMORPG's. She was not part of the group of friends who met at orientation, but she lived on the floor last year and joined the group through a male friend early in the year.

I interviewed two other students who frequent the lounge, but were not sophomores at the time:

- **Jessica** is a junior majoring in electrical engineering and computer science who moved to 5N from another floor in the same dorm.
- **Janelle** is a senior biology major and chemistry minor who has lived on 5N since she was a freshman and has watched the development of the lounge community. She is one of the few people who hangs out in the lounge and does not play any digital games.

How the 5N community came to be

The students I interviewed had varied takes on how the lounge bunch came to be. Their stories about how they started hanging out in the lounge did not conflict much, but they told stories from markedly different perspectives. I was able to piece together the following trajectory from their interviews.

They started playing games together, especially the video game *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*[6], in another student's room:

> Jessica: Before last year all they had was Andres, and he had [a Wii] in his room. He's a character; he graduated last year.
>
> Pat: I mean last year we had Andres; he's a big 6' 1" and 280 pounds, solid muscle, and he would play video games with us.

Andres was a vocal and humorous player who set the mood for the game play that continued in the 5N lounge after he graduated. He was known for screaming funny phrases at the characters in the game when something did not go the way he wanted it to.

> Janelle: That was Andres. I used to live a few doors over so all you'd hear was "Jigglypuff!" or "Pikachu!" very loudly. It was very amusing.
>
> Mei: I actually don't know why we get into it so much. Maybe it's Andres' influence. We play and we just start yelling at each other.
> Jessica: That's so Andres.
>
> Interviewer: But is it serious or is it fun?
> Jessica: When I was talking to our GRT [Graduate Resident Tutor] from last year...talking about getting a new GRT...she was like, you have to find someone who's OK with the noise and the yelling weird things like, "Screw you Pikachu!" and yeah, that's one of the trademarks of Andres.

Some of the current students played with Andres in his room, but then Mei decided to bring her own console, a Wii, out into the lounge.

> Mei: I think how it started – remember how I had my Wii last year? I brought my Wii over and just left it in the lounge because I was too lazy to clean up and I lived extremely close to the lounge...Then like after a few months, you know like after finals, like in November, I just started to leave it out there cause I was too lazy.
> Jessica: What were you playing then? *Fire Emblem*[7]?

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[6] *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* is Wii game, in which players control characters (usually from another Nintendo game) who battle up to three others in a fight-to-the-finish type showdown. It is the latest in a series of three *Super Smash Bros.* games published by Nintendo.

[7] *Fire Emblem* is a fantasy medieval-inspired series of tactical role-playing games played on the Nintendo that can be played either in single-player or multiplayer mode. It is turn-based and involves setting up players on a map

> Mei: Yeah *Emblem* and *Smash* basically. That was the only two games I had. Oh *Mario Kart*[8] too.
> Jessica: Yeah we played a lot of *Mario Kart* last year.
> Mei: 'Cept for I got so good at *Mario Kart;* last year I owned all of them.

In 2009, the lounge had previously been a space mostly for seniors to hang out, but after Mei moved her Wii in, she and the other freshman started to take over the space.

> Lisa: [The gaming] actually started up second semester. It was like first semester we were just trying to get to know Boston and going everywhere, trying to do problem sets, getting through college and stuff. And second semester we felt like we owned the place. Started taking the seniors' 5N lounge and playing games whenever we felt like it... the seniors used to always hang out there, but then we started playing games there and they got tired of the noise. So they started hanging out in different lounges.

The lounge became a social destination because of gaming. Students from other floors learned about it and began to visit, socialize, and play games. Some of the students who started off living on 5N moved to other floors, but continued to come back to the lounge often.

Chapter Structure

In the next three chapters, I examine the 5N community through the three lenses discussed above: the group, the games and game play, and the individual players.

Chapter One discusses the various activities that went on in the 5N lounge and how they intersected with the social goals of the community. Gaming was one of a network of activities that the group participated in, allowing various ways for students to playfully socialize with each other. I explain how the 5N community exemplifies many aspects of a *participatory culture*

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to beat the enemy. It is known for its strong character development and two of its characters also appear in *Super Smash Bros*.

[8] *Mario Kart* is a series of comical racing games involving characters from other Nintendo games.

and how that is related to its inclusiveness of women and people who do not play games.

Chapter Two narrows in focus to look at the content and structural elements of the games that were played in the 5N lounge, including how these elements facilitated the social goals of the group, and how the social goals influenced how the games were played. Digital and non-digital games were played in the lounge and, often, by different people. This allowed multiple ways of participating in gaming in the lounge. While the games the students played had winners and losers, the primary function of the games was to facilitate playful socializing.

Chapter Three explores the motivations, playing styles and experiences of individual players. The female players' gaming histories are described, revealing some commonalities – such as growing up playing digital games with mostly male peers – and showing the range of gaming preferences and styles women had depending on what they found pleasure in and what they had access to. This chapter also discusses the players' understandings of the terms “game” and “gamer” and how many of the female players negotiated the stereotypes of gaming culture.

CHAPTER ONE: The Community

It is my first night visiting the 5N lounge and I'm not sure what to expect. Lisa, my informant, meets me in the dorm lobby and takes me up the stairs. We walk down a hallway lined with dorm rooms until we arrive at the lounge. Here the hallway widens to the left into a large open space where about ten students are chatting and laughing. Lisa doesn't introduce me. Instead, she jumps onto a couch, which I gather is where she was sitting before I arrived, and starts playing *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (*Brawl*).

I put my backpack down, take off my coat, and survey the scene. The lounge is a spacious rectangle, about 25' by 20'. It is carpeted with bare walls except for a couple of MIT-issued posters, one of which tells students to “Think outside the bottle” (referring to alcohol) and two whiteboards. One whiteboard has a long mathematical equation scribbled on it. Half of one wall is a kitchen set up where a female student is cooking a complicated meal. Two round tables extend at a right angle from the kitchen wall.

Figure 2 - Students in the 5N Lounge on a Thursday night.

About five feet away from the kitchen area along the same wall is the focal point of the lounge – a large TV, probably 30 inches in size with a Nintendo Wii console tucked into a cabinet beneath it. Three standard, dorm-issue loveseats are placed in a U-shape around the TV, with another U of seats behind it. At this moment, two female and three male students sit in the seats closest to the TV, four of them with controllers in their hands, pressing away at the buttons and trading witty banter and phrases like "LOLOLOL" when something funny happens – a reference to the popular instant message abbreviation that means "laugh out loud." One male student without a controller in his hands sits with a laptop surfing the web. A female student asks no one in particular, "Is the food coming?" A male player, Pat, finishes his round in *Brawl* and calls the restaurant to check on the order.

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This first encounter was similar in many ways to every other visit I made to the 5N lounge on a Friday night. For the first half of the week, the space was like many other dorm lounges: a place for students to watch a TV show, eat dinner, or do homework. However, Thursdays through Sundays, the 5N lounge bustled with social activity.

The lounge was a destination – sometimes planned, sometimes happened upon – for a group of about twenty students. Some of them lived on 5N, but some lived on other floors and even in other dorms. During the busiest times in the lounge, there were usually a few activities happening at the same time, including playing digital games, playing non-digital games, cooking, eating, doing homework, reading, and having conversations with friends. It was uncommon for everyone to be doing the same thing at once. The lounge became an energetic, playful space that, at times, felt chaotic.

Before I visited the 5N lounge, I imagined it would be full of gamers like the kind portrayed on TV or in movies. These are stereotypical gamers; they are mostly young, white males who ascribe to a *hardcore ethic*: "spend as much time as possible, play as difficult games as possible, play games at the expense of everything else" (Juul, 2010, p. 29). I am not someone who regularly plays digital games. I have played them sporadically throughout life, but most of my notions of people who play digital games come from media representations, stories told by friends, and from reading previous studies on digital gaming culture. With this admittedly modest understanding of who plays and how, I assumed that if there were women present in the lounge, they would most likely be watching men play, and if women did play, they would be

viewed by the male players more as the "token female" than as an equal challenger.

I present my own preconceptions here because they are likely similar to those of people who are not involved in game studies or gaming subcultures. Digital gaming for many, and especially on consoles like the PS3 and Xbox, has become connected to the gamer stereotype I explained above. Recently, though, there have been studies that recognize the gamer stereotype is no longer, or never was, adequate for describing who plays digital games (Cassell & Jenkins, 2008; Fron et al., 2007; Voida & Greenberg, 2009). There is still much research to be done on players who fall outside of this stereotype in order to understand the wide range of individuals and playing contexts that are involved in digital gaming.

As I got to know the students in the 5N lounge over the eight months I visited, I found most of my preconceptions about who plays digital games and how they play to be too narrow. First, the male to female ratio of students in the lounge was almost always even. As I will show later, this was not the case during every instance of game play, but overall there were usually as many men as women in the lounge and many women participated in gaming.[9] Second, the racial and ethnic mix of the students was always such that students from U.S. minority groups made up the majority of students in the lounge. Most students were Chinese American and Taiwanese American students and smaller numbers were African American, Korean American, Indian American, and Caucasian.[10] Third, there were almost always students in the lounge that

[9] In fall 2009, women made up 45% of the undergraduate population at MIT (MIT).

[10] It should be noted here that, Asian American students make up a larger percentage of the undergraduate

never played digital games, or any games, at all. These students were in the lounge to socialize or participate in the other activities that were happening. Fourth, the tone of the lounge on weekend nights was always playful and social. Almost every activity in the lounge during weekend evenings, including gaming, was done with the minimal amount of seriousness. Even cooking or negotiations over shared resources, as I will show below, were jovial and social events in the 5N lounge.

In this chapter, I will dive deeper into the space of the 5N lounge, especially the activities of the students whom I met there, and how they defied my expectations. First, I will explain how the group can be seen as a *play community* that, as a whole, is more interested in socializing and the play process than in who wins or loses the games they play (DeKoven, 2002; Pearce, 2007). Second, I will explore how the 5N community exemplifies a *participatory culture* and how that contributes to its inclusiveness (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robinson, 2009).

Play community **of the 5N lounge**

I began my research of the 5N lounge thinking that it was a *gaming community*, by which I meant a group of friends whose central activity is playing digital games together. After a couple of Friday night visits to the 5N lounge though, I found that there were so many other activities in addition to gaming happening in the lounge that to call it a gaming community was not a valid characterization. In fact, the students themselves didn't call their group a gaming

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student population than represented in the U.S. population as a whole – about 25% at MIT and about 4.5% nationally. (MIT; U.S. Census Bureau)

community.

> Rachel: I feel like 5N is a lot more than a gaming community where we play games together. We go to concerts together, we go out shopping together, so it's a lot more of a family than just friends.

Rachel pointed out that there was more to their interactions than gaming together, and these interactions did not just happen in the 5N lounge. She goes as far as to call the group more than "friends" and even a "family," suggesting that the bonds between the groups' members were as close as siblings or cousins. Even though the 5N community was not technically a family, Rachel's allusion to the family here brings up the question: What kind of space is the 5N lounge? Is it a domestic or work space? Is it public or private?

For many of the students the dorm was their current home. It was where they slept, ate, and relaxed, but also where they spent countless hours doing their work on problem sets and studying. They were free of parental supervision, most likely for the first time, and their fellow residents were their friends and peers. In the dorms, they were also usually free from the pressures of having to look their best or act the same way they would in class or at an outside social event. Yet there were strangers in their midst, other students they might not know or people that they don't like, which made it feel less like a typical domestic space. The lounge was more public than their own rooms, but less public than the rest of campus. The 5N space had characteristics of both the public workplace and the private home.

For the purposes of this thesis, it might be best to think of the lounge, and the dorm that houses it, as *liminal* spaces. Turner (1974) describes liminal spaces as places where people

“pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states” (p.57). In these spaces, people “'play' with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them” (p. 60). The dorm and the lounge were sites where students spent the transitional time of college, moving from dependence on parents to dependence on themselves and their social networks. The line between adult and adolescent activities blurred. Students continued some of their favorite adolescent activities, often socializing, playing digital games, and joking around, but the possibility of new responsibilities, such as managing relationships, doing laundry, and cooking dinner were included in the mix.

The 5N lounge became a liminal “living room” for the students who use it, set up most likely in a fashion similar to their own families' homes with the seating centered around a TV and functioning as a place for people to gather and interact. This liminal living room was free from the influence of family, however, allowing them freedom to play with how they interacted with each other. This meant they might have done things that normally wouldn't be allowed at home whether it was telling dirty jokes, chasing each other around the couches, or staying up until 4am playing digital games.

But the lounge functioned in many ways like a traditional “living room.” As Voida and Greenberg (2009) found in their own study on co-located console gaming in residential settings, the combination of a TV and gaming system in a space can make it a *computational meeting place,* which not only brings people together, but also “mediat[es] among the diversity of

expertise, interests, and identities of the gamers who have been brought together" (p. 1562). Digital gaming attracted a diverse crowd of MIT students to the lounge, including those who had no interest in actually playing games, but liked to interact with the other people playing and watching. The lounge was physically set up with the TV as the focal point. All of the couches and lounge chairs faced it. This meant that activities that involved the TV usually became the main events in the lounge, with other activities going on around the periphery. The presence of the TV alone in the 5N lounge did not create a "diversity of expertise, interests and identities," but in this particular community it functioned as a technology that brought people together within a social context that valued diversity and socializing.

The students who came to the 5N lounge saw themselves as friends, and even family in some cases, but I found that the term *community* most aptly described their relationship to one another. Putnam (2000) has explained that "'[c]ommunity' means different things to different people," but that most people view their community as their family and friends, followed by their co-workers and neighbors (p. 273-275). The students in 5N were both friends and neighbors, with shared interests that were reinforced by their close proximity.

To be more specific, we can say the students in 5N created a *play community,* a particular type of community that plays games together that DeKoven (2002) has described in his book, *The Well-Played Game.* Play communities require time to commonly build trust, safety, conventions, and familiarity (DeKoven, 2002, pp. 17-18). The games played and who wins are not important. Play communities care most about whether the players had fun. He explained:

“We'll even find that the kind of activities we get involved in don't matter that much. Because our basis for trust and safety has broadened to such an extent that it resides not in any particular game but in our very relationship” (p. 21).

DeKoven's description of *play communities* is general and not necessarily related to digital games, but Pearce (2007) has built on DeKoven's concept in her work studying a particular group of people who played together in the a now defunct massively-multiplayer online game (MMOG) :

> The play community shares a strong social connection, as well as a mutual play style that is both inclusive and flexible, and can be transformed and relocated as needed to sustain the group. Different communities of play have different characteristics that arise out of the combined play styles of the individuals within them, each of whom is in turn transformed by the group play style. These play styles are also both influenced and transformed by the spaces they are enacted in. (p. 315)

As I interviewed and interacted more with the students in 5N, I came to understand that instead of a community based on playing a particular set of digital games, they were more aligned with the concept of play communities. The students shared a strong social connection and socializing was the most valued type of interaction in the lounge. They had cultivated relationships with each other over their year and half of living together that were based on trust and comfort, even in potentially competitive gaming situations. This shared approach to play transcended all the games they played, as well as most other activities they participated in together. This is not to say that the games they played were insignificant, but, as I will show in the next chapter, the games facilitated their social goals.

Social goals of the 5N community

> Pat: Our culture, instead of focused on games, is more focused on conversation. Conversation in the broadest sense of the word "conversation."

Socializing was a valued part of every activity in the 5N lounge, from homework to cooking to gaming. Conversation was usually playful between the five to twenty students that were in the lounge at any given time on the weekends. There were layers to the socializing that consisted of small groups or pairs of students talking here and there, as well as a shared ongoing conversation that was louder and carried across the lounge to include everyone in the room. This louder conversation usually consisted of jokes about what was happening on the TV, whether it was video games or a TV program; people telling funny stories; and sometimes even a couple people breaking into song.

About four months into my participant interviews, I interviewed some male players at the dorm. It was a typical night. In between conducting interviews in a smaller lounge down the hall, I went back to the main lounge and observed students involved in several different activities – all with a playful tone. When I first arrived, four people, including Lisa, were spread across the hall side of the lounge making dumplings. This was not the kind of culinary production you would find at the *Cordon Bleu* or even in a family kitchen. Instead, an assembly line had been created going from the kitchen wall and down to the floor, where Lisa and another student were stuffing dumplings around a big bowl on the carpet. The people making the food were conversing and joking with the other people in the lounge, who were playing games or sitting around on laptops.

Later, after conducting an interview, I came back to the lounge and found about seven people intermittently yelling at and laughing with each other. Pat and another male student were at the whiteboard behind the TV trying to calculate the amount of money each person had spent or owed for food that week. Some people were yelling out numbers while the others watched them calculate. It was a comedy of errors. Pat and the other students were confused. The people watching them yelled out possible solutions, creating a chaotic, but jovial mood in the lounge. The event culminated when one of the male students looked at the number next to his name and said "I owe myself $13! How can I owe myself $13?" Everyone laughed and went back to what they had been doing previously, while two students eventually worked out the math on the board.

This night exemplifies the playful tone of most activities that occurred in the 5N lounge. Even a negotiation over money, which in another context could become tense, was conducted as a light-hearted performance. By creating a tone in the space that is playful, the lounge becomes approachable by almost any student who passes by in the hall. The lounge was sometimes used like a stage to pull passing students in, or at least entertain them as they walked by.

After observing the activities in the lounge over several months, it was clear that the main *social goal* of the group was to playfully socialize. Play and socializing in the 5N community were usually ongoing and not oriented to a singular goal. The results of their activities were not emphasized. The process of each activity was drawn out and done in a playful and performative

manner. The results of the activities still existed, of course, in the situations mentioned above – the students in the lounge eventually ate dumplings and exchanged money for food supplies – but achieving these practical ends was secondary in importance to entertaining each other and fostering a social community.

The emphasis in the 5N community on a playful process over the results of the game is related to my choice to describe the group in 5N as a play community rather than a gaming community. As I showed in the Introduction, the term play has come to be valued differently than game. Current understandings of the terms tend to situate play as an open-ended, loosely structured activity and games as more structured activities that are often associated with having an end goal or win-state. If we accept these understandings of the terms for now, as they are the dominant view in game studies and the game industry, I raise the question: What does focusing a community on play instead of a community that games afford the participants?

The most apparent way the 5N community's focus on play shaped their activities was that they were able to incorporate a much wider range of activities and participants than would have been possible for a community strictly interested in gaming. Lounge visitors had many optional activities to take part in depending on their immediate needs and desires. If they had a lot of work to do, but wanted to unwind a little and get some aggression out while doing it, they sat near the TV and played *Brawl* with their homework nearby to work on between turns. If they enjoyed reading, but wanted to be around people, they could sit in the next row of chairs with their book and interact when they felt like it. If they wanted to joke and interact face-to-face

with their friends, they could make dinner together or play a card game. Each activity allowed for different needs to be fulfilled.

Also, because the collective identity of the 5N community was based more on being a group of friends who liked to playfully socialize rather than based strictly on gaming, their game play had lower stakes than other communities that make gaming their highest priority and main activity. Status within the 5N play community did not depend solely on how skillful someone was at winning games. The ability to win was only one factor that shaped how other members perceived each other. More important to the group was how social a person was and how they contributed to making the activities fun and enjoyable for all. This emphasis on the collective experience of the group during the play process instead of accomplishments of individuals helped maintain the low stakes social context for gaming.

The 5N community is an example of a one that places particular value on the play process over who wins or loses. Activities that fit under Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) definition of games are popular in the lounge, but the formal goals are de-emphasized and replaced with the group's social goals. This results in a community where the barriers to participation in gaming, either as a player or an observer, are low and the members of the community are both male and female and have a range of experiences playing games. Creating these lower barriers to participation are especially important for encouraging people who are unfamiliar with or feel excluded from gaming to start to play.

5N community as a participatory culture

In addition to being a play community, the students in the 5N lounge can be seen as a *participatory culture,* which Jenkins et al. (2009) define as:

> [A] culture with low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)" (pp.5-6).

Initially used as a conceptual framework for understanding fan practices around popular media (Jenkins, 1992), it has since been applied by researchers to other fan and non-fan based contexts both online and offline (Burgess, Green, Jenkins, & Hartley, 2009; Driscoll, 2009). I use participatory culture as a framework for understanding how the students in the 5N community learn from one another and create a shared culture.

Participatory culture is a particular type of social model that is different from other more hierarchical and exclusive models. In the case of the 5N community, their focus on playful socializing helps them create an inclusive context for gaming, but the factors that create a participatory culture – social connection between participants, low barriers to entry, cultural production of shared taste and knowledge, and an informal mentorship system – help insure that all participants have the opportunity to learn from each other and add to the culture and knowledge production of the community

It should be fairly obvious by now that the students in the 5N play community had a social

connection to one another. This was partly enabled by their close proximity to each other. Many examples of participatory culture rely on mediated forms of communication to share information and resources especially when participants are spread across a wide geographic area (Burgess et al., 2009; Jenkins, 1992; Taylor, 2006). The students in 5N had the benefit of direct access to one another for playing games, collaborating, and socializing. Their constant interactions strengthened their trust and affection for each another, making them "family"-like, as Rachel explained.

Families, friends, and other communities are understood to be socially connected groups, but they are not by default participatory cultures. These groups could be hierarchical or run by an elite sub-group and exclusionary. This was not the case with the 5N community. My own experience coming into the group as an outsider helped me understand the low barriers the group had for participation. Lisa was the first person to bring me to the lounge, but once I was there she wasn't required to explain who I was to anyone. This has to do somewhat with the fact that I am already an MIT student and in the same department as Lisa, but it also seemed the norm to have friends of friends come to the lounge from time to time. I sat on the couch that first night watching Lisa and a couple others play *Brawl.* A couple people introduced themselves to me and asked me who I was. Even after they found out I was a graduate student they didn't seem to wonder why I was there.

Within thirty minutes of arriving I was offered a game controller when one of the players got up to do something else. I warned the other players I didn't know how to play, but I was reassured

that it did not matter and I should just press the down button at the same time as the B button a lot. I lost every round that night, and most of the rounds over the next couple months that I visited, but I was never prevented from playing or ridiculed in the process of learning. (I also had a lot of fun.) Part of the community's ability to maintain low barriers to entry had to do with the kinds of games that the students played (which I will discuss in the next chapter), but my acceptance in the group was also connected to knowing someone already affiliated and my ability to socialize and joke around with the other students while I was in the lounge.

It was relatively easy for me to participate in the 5N community, but what exactly was I participating in? On the surface it might look like the students are just "hanging out," not producing anything of value, but Ito et al. (2009) have included "hanging out" in a recent study of young people's digital media usage as a significant "genre of participation," in which "youth develop and discuss their taste in music, their knowledge of television and movies, and their expertise in gaming, practices that become part and parcel of sociability in youth culture" (p. 44). This understanding of "hanging out" involves people making meaning from media texts – whether its music, digital games or Internet videos – and sharing their knowledge and understandings of them with one another.

At first in the lounge, I wasn't sure what to make of the jovial, fast-paced conversations that took place there. I eventually began to learn some of the references they used and their recurring jokes. This talk was important to creating the feeling of a community and a shared way of communicating. This kind of conversation is a version of what Fiske (1992) calls

enunciative productivity. In his essay, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," Fiske proposes three categories for the way that people produce popular culture. The first, *semiotic production*, is "essentially interior" and occurs when individuals make meaning out of social identity and social experience from aspects of cultural commodities (for example: a movie, a digital game, or the music of a particular artist) (p. 37). The next category, *enunciative productivity,* is "when the meanings made are spoken and are shared," whether it's through conversation or the way someone chooses to dress or style their hair (p. 37). The third, which was rarer in the 5N community, is *textual productivity*. This is when people produce and distribute their own texts within their community that draw from a particular cultural commodity (p. 39). Textual productivity is most often associated with fan communities, but enunciative productivity is just as important for creating shared understandings of texts and cultural knowledge that is valued by others.

The students who hung out in the 5N lounge were not fans of one particular cultural commodity. Their interest in digital games was part of a larger media ecology that included social networking, music, humorous Internet videos, and movies. Each member of the 5N play community brought their own mix of expertise that they shared with the community: some people knew more about games, some knew about biology, some knew about cooking. There was a constant flow of knowledge shared about how to do things, media to check out, or events to attend. Several times members of the 5N bunch told me they had tried out a digital game because another person in the group had suggested it. Jessica, who did not play many digital games before college, was turned on to the playing the *Fire Emblem* series of games after

watching Pat and Mei play them in the lounge. During my visits, students shared a range of media with one another, from digital game trailers to songs. Jason described how he shares his taste in DVDs with the lounge:

> I'll bring stuff and we'll watch that – I brought *Looney Toons* to the lounge and we watched a whole disc of that. That was fun, people got into it. I like inflicting my taste in movies upon others around me. We watched, *Hot Fuzz*...I brought it to the lounge to watch with Lisa and [another student] and before long everyone in the room was watching it. I like to think I have good taste in movies.

Jason is open to sharing his taste in movies with the group and the group is open to watching what he brings. If people come to the lounge while something is playing on the TV, they feel welcome to watch. For example, one night a couple students suggested we all watch the movie, *Pirate of the Caribbean*. This was a movie some students had seen many times and some students had never seen. At first, only six people were watching, but by the end about seven more people had joined us from just passing the lounge and seeing that the movie was playing. These events were not necessarily decided upon by all the group members in advance, but instead negotiated by individuals and small groups in order to fit in with the other ongoing activities of the lounge.

Ford (2006) has explored the media consumption patterns for students in an MIT dorm and found that “communal viewings are one of the staples of the dorm environment, where many people do not have televisions and must instead rely on shared viewing areas” (p. 37). The students' personal interests, shared space and sociability resulted in a back and forth of knowledge about and usage of music, DVDs, games, consoles, and countless other media. This was the case in the 5N community as well. The students gathered and shared their knowledge

about a range of media texts through various forms of discourse – conversations, emails, jokes, and even a Facebook page where they shared links – bits of which were then repeated and reincorporated into the community's culture.

In addition to media recommendations, more traditional conceptions of knowledge were shared when students did homework in the lounge. While the students, at the time, were pursuing a range of majors, many of them had attended the same classes in their freshman year. Working on problem sets for these classes, which students are encouraged to collaborate on, was one of the first activities that initially brought the students to the lounge. They were able to use each other as resources when problems were tricky or they had a different area of expertise to share. During one visit, I observed Janelle sitting with Pat for over an hour helping him understand biology concepts for a class he was currently in, a class she had already taken. This instance also shows the benefit of having students in different years as part of the group, since they were able to pass knowledge on to the newer students.

Janelle's homework help was one type of mentorship that goes on in the community, but there was also mentorship around gaming. I unfortunately was not able to take advantage of the informal mentoring system that existed in the 5N community, but if I had been living in the dorm, I most likely could have asked for or been offered more guidance from some of the members. Lisa explained how she took on the role of the mentor at times:

> Yeah, I have a lot of friends who – girl friends – who want to actually get into gaming but they always feel like they're gonna suck at it, not be any good and its too hard to learn and I'll have to wait for everyone else to leave and invite them into the room to play and teach them how to play a little bit before they start to play with everybody else.

Lisa was not secretly helping these women out because they would be ridiculed, but because many woman players *thought* they would be made fun of or embarrassed if they weren't on a competitive skill level with the other people playing. This anxiety around starting to play digital games and playing with others might stem from players' previous experience of seeing or trying gaming in a higher-stakes context, but for those women who had little to no experience with digital gaming, it also could have been influenced by their understanding of who is supposed to play. These women saw gaming through a lens that frames digital gaming as an activity for males rather than females and an activity that requires players to have the right kinds of skills and competencies to participate. Lisa was one of the most experienced players in the group and recognized that she had knowledge to share with other people in the community who joined without much gaming experience. Adding to her ability to mentor other female students was that she was one of the few women in the group who had her own console that she kept in her room. This allowed Lisa and anyone she mentored easy and private access to practice digital games, free from any real or imagined outside pressures.

The 5N play community was in many ways a participatory culture. But how does this relate to a community's inclusiveness? The social connections and knowledge sharing that took place in the group could also happen in many other contexts. The most important factors of participatory culture that made this community more inclusive than many groups who play games together – that we might consider non-participatory – were their low barriers to entry and the informal mentorship they had created. Not every group who plays games is able or willing to play with new players. This is especially true if players are most interested in building

their own skill level or competing at the highest level possible. Mentoring also helps lower barriers by supporting new players or members of the group to learn from one another. Players who are most interested in increasing their own skill might have less interest in spending time they could be achieving or leveling-up in game teaching someone else how to play. If a player is more interested in meeting new people or diversifying their social context while gaming, they might be more motivated to bring new people into the game.

Conclusion

I have yet to explain in detail how the 5N community played games together. There is a reason for this: The students in 5N were a community centered around play, not games. They were a play community and a participatory culture, both of which influenced their inclusiveness. Playing digital games was one of their favorite activities, but it was part of a network of activities that were available to participate in. Members of the community who didn't want to play games had other ways they could interact with those who did play. By not identifying their community strictly with gaming, they created a low stakes environment for those who are had less experience playing digital games.

The shared goal of playfully socializing shaped all of the interactions in the lounge. The 5N community created a space where they could relax and be productive. What mattered to the students was a playful and social process. In the end, there were results to most activities, but they were not as valued as creating social ties and making each other laugh. This is not to say they didn't share knowledge. In fact, the students were constantly sharing information and

knowledge through conversation, jokes, and an informal mentoring system.

The 5N community is not shown here solely as a model for bringing more women into gaming, but more generally as a group that is more social, inclusive, and participatory than current notions of gaming culture. In the following chapters, I focus more on the role that digital games play in the lounge, as well as on the players' individual experiences.

CHAPTER TWO: Games and Game Play

I initially started my research in the 5N lounge because it was a site where women played digital games together. While the structure of the games the students in 5N played was similar to others that groups play together, it was what they valued during game play that made this group different. Jason explained his approach to playing *Brawl*, the most popular digital game in the lounge:

> In *Brawl* I don't play that intensely to begin with... I think the best analogy would be...when two kids sword fight, they're not trying to smack each other they're trying to create as engaging or exciting interaction possible. You don't see them swinging for each other you see them swinging for each other's swords, you try to create a sense of being cool. No sense of hostility. With gaming a lot of people play to win. They'll have all the tactics down and unbeatable combos. When I play, I play to have fun. Winning is still the objective, but I don't see the need to take it too seriously. Fighting to fight, not fighting to win - in *Brawl* at least.

Jason's explanation was emblematic of the rest of the community's approach to gaming. During the process of playing the game was when most of the community members found pleasure. Winners and losers of the games they played were determined, but because achievement in gaming was not required for being a valued member of the community, these results had less significance than in higher-stakes contexts.

In this chapter, I narrow in on the games and game play of the group and explore the following questions:

- *What games are played in the lounge and how are they played?*
- *What role do games play in the 5N lounge?*

To answer these questions, I will first explain a model for understanding motivations for playing games created by Juul (2010) that will help frame my discussion of gaming in 5N. Then, I will discuss the community's most popular games and how their structural elements facilitated the social goals of the group. Finally, I will explore how the group's motivations shaped how the games were played and what the games offered the community that made them more popular than other possible activities.

Games and social goals

Towards the end of the week, gaming activity increased in the lounge. Students usually had more time for playing Thursdays through Sundays, as classes had ended for the week and homework and studying could be put on hold. The three most popular types of games played in the lounge were *Brawl;* a trick-taking card game, *Tractor;* and a Western-themed card game, *Bang!.* I will not attempt to analyze the games in their entirety in this thesis, but I will focus on the game elements that facilitated playful socializing and how the games were played in the lounge.

The structure of games is often seen as less flexible than the social rules and norms that surround game play. This is because digital games tend to be programmed to allow only certain actions, and card games usually have codified rules that are passed down, agreed upon, and

meant to be followed. Yet, the three most popular games in the 5N community were flexible enough that students could negotiate the game play to support the sociability of the lounge and maintain a playful mood. Taylor (2006) has found similar flexibility and negotiation in her work on players in MMOG's. “Despite the common notion that computer games lock down modes of play via the system, rules and norms can be, especially in the case of MMOG's, incredibly contextual, socially negotiated, heterogeneous, ambiguous, and quite often contradictory between players” (p. 157). Taylor's understanding of the relationship of the structure and the social context of games is one of constant interaction, with neither able to function separately from the other and both influencing one another throughout game play.

Before talking about the actual structure and content of 5N's games, it is important to have a framework for understanding how they are related to the community's social goals and game play. Juul (2010) has asked the question: “If a shared understanding of goals is part of how we play multiplayer games, how does this influence the way we play?” (p.126) In order to answer this question, Juul offers “three considerations for evaluating a game action”:

- Frame 1: The game as goal-orientation – Desire to win
- Frame 2: The game as experience – Desire for an interesting game
- Frame 3: The game as a social, normal context – Desire for management of a social situation (p. 127)

Juul draws these three considerations as boxes of different sizes. Frame 1 is the smallest because it is the most closely tied to the formal rules of the game. Frames 2 and 3 are larger because they involve more of the social rules and context that surround games. Each consideration takes on different a weight in different contexts and depends on the motivations of each player. They are a helpful way for understanding how different motivations for playing

a game can exist at the same time and to varying degrees.

With this framework, Juul offers considerations to weigh when trying to understand an action a player takes in a game. He suggests an ambiguity exists in multiplayer games specifically because: "they simultaneously carry a notion of a noble contest *and* have a wide range of undetermined social consequences, of meanings" (p. 122). Often the social rules in a gaming context are "understood." If you play a digital game alone and break a rule, the computer will usually let you know because it is programmed to give you feedback, but if you break a social rule during a game, a person may or may not let you know. The players may not have made the social rules explicit at the beginning of the game. After explaining the relevant structural elements of each of the three games, I will call on Juul's framework to help explain how these elements interacted with the social context to shape the players' motivations.

Super Smash Bros. Brawl

I knew from my interviews that students in the 5N lounge individually played a range of video and online games, but I was surprised that in all my visits I only observed them playing one digital game as a group – *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*. I did observe a couple of people playing other games on their own laptops, such as Jason playing *Diablo 2*[11] and a female student I didn't interview playing *Jade Dynasty*[12]. Also some of the 5N students would go to Lisa's room periodically to play *Rock Band*[13] together. However, in the lounge, *Brawl* was the obvious group

[11] *Diablo 2* is Hell-themed "hack and slash" role-playing game that can be played in single or multiplayer mode.
[12] *Jade Dynasty* is a free online MMORPG.
[13] *Rock Band* is a game that allows players to play along with popular songs using instrument-like input devices. It

favorite.

The *Super Smash Bros.* series are video games, but they are also something of a pop cultural phenomenon. There is a significant fan population that plays the game and maintains websites with vast amounts of information about game play, the characters in the game, and *Smash Bros.* tournaments. When *Brawl* was released, nearly one-third of all Wii owners bought it in the first month (Remo, 2008). Several of the students, including Lisa, Jessica, Mei, and Pat played *Smash Bros.* games in middle and high school, making them already experienced (to varying degrees) with how to play when they arrived at MIT.

Figure 3 – TV screen in the 5N lounge during a *Brawl* bout.

can be played competitively or collaboratively.

The basic game play of all the *Smash Bros.* games is centered around fighting bouts between up to four players that are played on *stages* inspired by the backgrounds of other Nintendo games. The games can be single or multiplayer and have different modes of play to choose from. In a bout, players choose a character to play and manipulate the controller with simple direction and button combinations like “Up+B button” to make their chosen character do different moves that attack other players. When a character is hit, their “damage meter,” which is measured as a percentage, increases from 0% and they are thrown into the air. As the damage increases, a player is thrown farther from the battle area and has to recover, sometimes saving themselves from falling off the stage. A player loses a life if they fall off the stage or if their damage reaches a certain threshold, which throws them so far they cannot recover. Players are given three lives, but when they lose the third, they are out of the game. The last player left on the stage wins the bout. The statistics from the bout, including how many knock outs (KO's) you caused to other players, are shown on a screen after the bout ends.

Characters

The characters the players can chose to control in these bouts almost all come from other Nintendo video games, including *Pokemon*, *Zelda,* and *Super Mario Bros*. These are characters most people who played on a Nintendo platform growing up in the 1980s or 1990s would be familiar with, and even have nostalgia for, just as they might with a favorite character from a book or TV series. Players' familiarity with the characters varies depending on the amount of experience they have playing each character's original Nintendo game.

Figure 4 – TV screen in 5N lounge showing *Brawl* character selection screen.

Each character in *Brawl* was part of another story line in their original video game. For example Mario, Luigi, Princess Peach, Bowser, and Yoshi appeared in the classic *Super Mario Bros.* series of games and each had a specific role such as hero, sidekick, damsel in distress, and villain. Pikachu, Pokemon Trainer, and Jigglypuff are well-known for being characters from *Pokemon* games, TV shows, movies, and trading cards. Samus is the main character in the game *Metroid* and one of the few female characters to be the protagonist of a game. Players who are familiar with the stories of these characters in other games sometimes recall and incorporate them as they play *Smash Bros.* games. Jakobsson & Akira (2007) have referred to the practice of incorporating characters from different games into another game as *intermedia game-play.* He questions the assumption that games are closed systems "where we leave a gaming session with nothing more than the satisfaction of winning or frustration of losing" (p. 388). Instead, players carry the stories and their own memories of playing the characters in the past while they play in a new scenario of the *Smash Bros.* series. I will show how story lines for characters

come up during game play conversation below.

In addition to the carried-over story lines from the characters' original games, the players in 5N also created nicknames and fictional identities for some of the characters. These nicknames became the catalysts for jokes during play. Mei and Jessica explained:

> Jessica: We've named Luigi - “Pedo”
> Mei: He's got that weird dance and that mustache.
> Jessica: ...Pink Captain Falcon, is “Captain Fabulous” – Andres's favorite

The nickname “Pedo” is short for “pedophile.” The students in 5N came up with this nickname because of a stereotype of pedophiles as being men who have mustaches and suggestive body language. In the game, the character Luigi has a mustache and an attack that looks like a ballet move that the students found “weird.” They have created a nickname for a pink version of the character Captain Falcon that uses the word “fabulous,” which is stereotypically associated with homosexual men. These nicknames do not make the players more likely to lose, but from my observations they did make the characters less likely to be chosen by players, unless they *wanted* to be the focus of jokes during play, which some players did do from time to time.[14]

Another term used during game play is “spam.” This term is also used in other video gaming contexts to describe when a player attacks other players in-game repeatedly without giving their opponent time to counter attack. In the case of *Brawl,* this can happen when a character has a move that can attack other characters from far away. Mei and Jessica explained they use

[14] This was one of the few instances in the lounge where I found that even though the community was inclusive to a relatively wide range of participants, there were still signs of heteronormative behavior that framed association of a student's character with homosexuality as undesirable. For more on digital games and sexuality see Consalvo (2003).

a name pun for Lisa's favorite character to play, Samus:

> Mei: We call Samus “Spamus”
> Jessica: Cause Samus is very easy to spam, ‘cause she has like two missile attacks.
> Interviewer: Wait what's spamming?
> Jessica: You just keep doing the same move over and over again.
> Mei: Just keep on attacking with the same move and some people get stuck in it and they get mad.

I was surprised to find out that other players made jokes about Lisa and her favorite character for “spamming” because she seemed like a respected and skilled player when she played. When I first started playing the game with her, she won often and I didn't realize the rest of the group did not appreciate one of her techniques. I will discuss the 5N relationship to “spamming” in the later section on game controls.

Finally, the number of characters available allowed most players to vary their experience from bout to bout. Some players chose the same characters almost every time because they had learned their specific attacks and felt most comfortable playing them. Some players learned characters' moves by playing different modes of the game (most likely at times when there weren't many people in the lounge):

> Jason: Also with Jessica, that was kind of forced, like “Hey, Jessica will you help me go through *Subspace Emissary*?”...the adventure mode in *Smash.* It can be two player. The thing is you don't get to choose your character, in each scenario you have a couple to choose from. That kind of forced her to learn how to play.

Other players chose different characters, or even used the “random” choice when playing to mix up their experience and practice the moves of different characters. If players want to challenge themselves more in *Brawl*, they can switch to another character they are less familiar with, which helped even out bouts where players' skill levels varied. This was always the choice

of the player and was more likely to be done by the more experienced players.

Modes

Brawl allows players to choose between several modes, including; a solo *adventure mode* that integrates bouts into a narrative; a *classic solo mode* that lets you play through all the stages of the game battling the other characters; and a multi-player *brawl mode* that lets players battle each other in self-contained bouts that vary in length but usually last several minutes. The b*rawl* mode was the most popular mode I saw played in the 5N lounge. This mode allows players to play a never-ending string of bouts. In 5N, the bouts were always self-contained. I never saw them play in a tournament style where the winner moves on and losers have to wait their turn to play again. This meant that players were able to easily join in or leave the game between bouts because the results didn't matter and game play happened in short bursts. Winning or losing didn't factor into whether or not you could play, but there was persistent knowledge that carried over from gaming session to gaming session about who was skilled at playing which character and how some people played certain characters.

As Jakobsson & Akira (2007) found in their research with *Smash Bros. Melee* players in Sweden, it is not just the programmed rules of the game design that determine how a game is played. Instead, the "rules are influenced by, and affect, the social and cultural aspects of the gaming context" (p. 386). They observed clubs that met and played *Melee* in different ways, including a "random" tournament style where a variety of social rules were added in addition to the programmed bout rules. After each bout, the winners would have their names placed in a hat to play more bouts, and losers were given a chance to try to get a six from rolling dice. If they

rolled a six, their names were also placed in the hat to continue playing. This element increased the randomness of who continued playing. Inserting more randomness in the Swedish console club bouts were not part of the game design, but were added by members as a way of evening out the range of skill levels in the club. The role of randomness is discussed more in the controls section.

In 5N, there were not as many social rules added to *Brawl* as Jakobsson and Akira found in their study, but the flexibility of being able to join or leave whenever the player wanted to fit with the social goals of the group. The 5N group had socially constructed norms around how bouts are played. If a controller was free, anyone could join in. Whether you lost or won, it didn't matter, you could keep playing. If someone was watching the game while you played and you wanted to go do something else you offered them the controller. The players often changed throughout the night, and the gaming never built to an ultimate resolution of who won the most bouts.

Controls

The controls of *Brawl* are relatively simple compared to more traditional "fighting games," like *Tekken* and *Street Fighter.* These two games, and several others like them, require players to memorize and execute long combinations of buttons, called "combos," that allow their characters to execute a series of complicated attacks. In *Brawl,* most attacks require pressing one action button at the same time as pressing a direction. These less complicated controls are important to gaming participation because they lower the barrier to entry.

I can use my own experience as an example since I had never played *Brawl* before visiting the 5N lounge. I was given the instructions to “Press B and down” when I was first offered the controller. What I was doing the first couple sessions would be considered “button mashing” – a pejorative term for when a new player simply hits all the buttons without knowing what they do. As I played more, trying “B and down” and similar control variations with other buttons and directions, I was able to figure out different moves for the characters I played. It wasn't long before I was able to periodically KO other characters controlled by those in the group who had more experience. The easy-to-learn controls made my experience playing the game enjoyable sooner than if I had to learn long and difficult-to-execute combos. The simpler controls also allowed me to continue socializing during the game because I didn't have to concentrate on executing complicated button combinations.

There is debate around whether or not the *Smash Bros*. games should be considered part of the “fighting game” genre made popular by arcade and video games like *Street Fighter* and *Tekken.* There are several aspects of the *Smash Bros.* games that are different from these games, including more comic violence, more than two characters battling at once, and the option to turn on “items” which give characters more powerful attacks. A discussion on a GameSpot.com forum entitled “Super Smash Bros. games are not fighting ...” (AnemicAnd_Sweet, 2008) presents a quote from a *Nintendo Power* editor saying *Brawl* is not a “fighting game.” The forum poster uses this quote as evidence to prove to *Brawl* players that the game isn't meant to be considered a part of the same genre of digital games. Respondents to the post comment back and forth about whether it should or shouldn't be considered a fighting game, but it

becomes obvious that the genre categorizations (like the terms “game” and “gamer” as I'll show in the next chapter) are relative to players' experience and context.

Jason believed that the simpler controls made *Brawl* better than most fighting games:

> [*Brawl*] is more sophisticated than any other fighting game. I like simplicity in a game. I like simplicity but yet still challenging, so it’s not like *Dora the Explorer* who has to arrange monkeys by color. It's not that simplicity – So compare *Smash* to *Tekken*, or *Soul Caliber*, or *Street Fighter* where you have to memorize combos and input them correctly. *Smash* is very formulaic. It's easy to pick up. But yet the good players can still blow – with the same knowledge of the game – blow a smaller fish out of the water.

For Jason, sophistication in a game meant a balance between simplicity and challenge, which he found in *Brawl.* The simpler controls involved strategy and skill to be used effectively to beat opponents. Jason implies that *Brawl's* lack of emphasis on combos, which require complicated hand-eye coordination and memorization, allow players to focus more on how to best use the attacks. There is no need to tap in a long combo within strict time limitations, but you do have to know when to use an attack on which player, which requires thinking ahead, knowing what the other players are doing, and other character's strengths and weaknesses.

The debate around whether or not *Smash Bros.* games are fighting games or not is also related to conceptions of skill in digital games. Without going into great detail about the role of skill and chance in games, which has been studied elsewhere[15], it is a common perception that the more a game is based on chance or randomness, the less skill is required for winning. This is because skill is related to the decisions players make in a game, and chance is beyond players'

[15] See Brathwaithe and Schreiber (2008) and Salen and Zimmerman (2004)

influence. For people who play games competitively and highly value winning, it is important to play games that require skill because the result of players' decisions can be mapped to how "good" or "bad" they are at the game.

Brawl is different from other fighting games because players can allow "items" to appear during the bouts that strengthen characters' attacks. These items add elements of randomness into the game. Lisa explained her view of "items" to me in an email:

> I would say the most randomizing/equalizing part of *Brawl* would be the items. They range from Pokeballs that summon *Pokemon* to kill other players, to food for health regeneration, to smart bombs, etc. The biggest item in *Brawl* is the Smash Ball, which basically gives the player who receives it a special move. There's some skill involved in efficiently using your special move... Almost everyone I've ever played Brawl with played with items for about a week, just to see all the Smash Ball powers, then turned them off to remove as much randomness from the game as possible.

Lisa referred to the items as "equalizing" because they could be especially helpful to players who had less experience with the game or had fallen behind in the bout. Allowing items could be a way to equalize the game play between players of different skill levels and make participation more inclusive. This assumes though that there isn't skill involved in grabbing and using the items in a bout. In the case of 5N, the students found the items didn't make the game play more equalized, as Lisa described:

> We turned off items in our matches mostly because it made the game a little too chaotic (especially when trying to teach someone new how to play) and there would be instances where one player would constantly manage to get the smash ball/items and kill everyone over and over again. We found the games were more enjoyable when we were able to focus on the one vs. one mechanics without having to worry about some random person throwing a pokeball at the back of our heads.

In this case, even though the gaming in the 5N lounge tended to be inclusive of different skill levels, they found that using items in bouts did not fit with their motivations for playing and

were eventually turned off. The items were being used by players who could grab them first and use them to dominate the bouts, keeping other players from being able to win. Winning, while it might not have been the primary goal of the individual players in 5N, wasn't irrelevant. If the same person won every time it became a less fun process for all involved and no longer fit with the group's social goal of playfully socializing. What was more important about the inclusion of items in the game structure of *Brawl* was that there was the option to turn the items off. This meant that players could modify the game to fit with the immediate motivations and contexts of the game and choose whether to turn the items on or off according to how it would facilitate the social goals of the 5N community.

Also related to skill in games is the technique I mentioned above called “spamming.” It is possible to win bouts by “spamming,” but it was not seen as a technique that required skill. How much players valued skill varied. Some of the players in the lounge said that they spam, but that it wasn't a big deal in 5N because winning and losing wasn't taken too seriously. Rachel had a similar experience to my own *Smash* playing:

> I didn't start playing *Smash* until I got here as well, and back then it was like button mashing. ‘Cause they were like here hold down B and I was like its not working...So I'd spam a certain attack. They'd make jokes about it, but in the end it was like, “Good job, Thanks for playing.”

Some players expressed a dislike for spamming in their interviews, but I never heard it brought up in a way during game play that would make someone feel like it wasn't allowed. There were jokes that pointed to it as a tactic that required less skill, but no one ever felt like they were breaking the rules if they won by spamming. If it meant that people could make a joke about a character or bout, then it added to the game and that was what mattered. As we saw before,

Lisa's favorite character, Samus, was nicknamed Spamus because of how easy it is to spam other players with her. This didn't stop Lisa from playing the character, but it most likely reminded her that spamming shouldn't be the only technique she used during game play.

Witty banter and trash talk

For the most part, the socializing during game play in the 5N lounge bounced back and forth between conversation about the game being played and more general conversation with people who were not playing. In terms of conversation about the game, the most prevalent types of player social interaction related to the games were witty banter and playful trash talking. These types of conversation around the game consisted of players yelling at their character and other players' characters on the screen, exclaiming “Yes!” or “No!” at surprising actions in the game, and communicating their in-game goals to other players.

Trash talk has traditionally been a term for the act of trading of insults, often offensive or crude, between players during sporting events. It is commonly associated with professional sports, especially basketball and football. Eveslage and Delaney (1998) characterized trash talk and other forms of “insult talk” as having certain traits including: “they continuously stress and establish hierarchies; they involve personal insults or put-downs, often as calls to defend masculinity and honor; and they often degrade objects defined as 'feminine'” (p. 241). While this characterization is the case in higher stakes gaming and sporting environments, trash talking in the 5N lounge served a different purpose.

The trash talk in the 5N lounge was by no means as crude or mean-spirited as it can be in more serious contexts, but it did play on similar conventions. When I first visited the lounge, I thought the yelling between players was similar to traditional trash talk. As I observed and talked to more students, it became clear that the exchanges were much more performative and light-hearted than can be observed at sporting events or in online gaming. Instead of seriously insulting each other, the players in 5N performed roles of more aggressive players. They used phrases and took on attitudes that are used in authentic trash talking instances, but performed them in over-the-top ways, directing them at the characters on the screen instead of the other players. The content of what they said was not meant to offend anyone, but instead meant to entertain the other players and the other people in the lounge.

This type of banter started before the lounge was a hub for gaming. Janelle remembered hearing Andres, the senior on the floor who has since graduated, often yell, “Screw you Pikachu!” from his room the year before people started playing *Brawl* in the lounge. Some of the players agreed that he was the person who started the bantering during the game.

> Pat: A lot of it started with Andres. The emotional outbursts are not directed at the players, but usually the characters themselves. Like Andres when he played, and his characters would do something he didn't like, he'd be like, “Pikachu!”
> Interviewer: So it's indirect, you're trash talking to the thing on the screen?
> Pat: There's a lot of like, “Your face!”...Someone will just say something.
> Interviewer: That's understood?
> Pat: Yeah, it's understood, like the sentiment of, “Your face” is understood.
> Interviewer: What are the other outbursts?...
> Pat: ...A good example for trash talk is when we were playing *Mario Kart* last year, we were playing a particular course where there's traffic and Andres was driving and about to take first place, and something hit him... and he's just like, “What the hell! You're as big as the world!” Just random outbursts that we kept in our collective memories...

The trash talk in 5N was indirect and playful, which made it less threatening to both new and

experienced players. Players rarely looked at one another while playing a bout, directing all their comments at the screen. Exclamations could be sparked by real frustrations during game play, but in a way that targeted the characters on the screen, not the other players. The 5N players projected their frustrations onto the characters on the screen and made the game play into a performance for anyone in the lounge to observe or interact with.

Some players trash talked more than others, and it was not clear why this was. It did not seem to be related to gender. All of the women who played frequently – Mei, Jessica, and Lisa – were active trash talkers, as was Pat and most of the other male students who played. Playing ability was also not a determinant as to whether someone participated in the banter, though if someone was playing poorly they were more likely to say something disparaging about their own character and call attention to their struggles than to talk trash another character.

I mentioned earlier that sometimes characters' story lines from other Nintendo games carried over into a bout. An example of this occurred when we were playing *Brawl* one night. Jason was playing Link and Lisa was playing Zelda, both characters from the *Legend of Zelda* series. Throughout the *Zelda* series, Link is usually on a quest to save Princess Zelda, but she has also been able to fight for herself in some games. While many fans of the *Zelda* series have their own readings of a romantic relationship between Link and Zelda, the evidence from the games mostly leaves their status ambiguous.

This ambiguity was referenced during the trash talk of a *Brawl* bout involving Jason, Lisa, and

myself. Jason as Link was targeting Lisa as Zelda, which prompted Lisa to say jokingly to Jason, “Don't beat up your girlfriend!” This was said in hopes that he might stop attacking her character for a while and battle someone else. Instead, Jason responded, “Girlfriend?! Zelda is the biggest tease this side of Peach!” (Peach is the princess Mario is tasked with saving in most of the *Super Mario* games.) This exchange, which is also significant in terms of gender role expectations, transfers the players' readings of characters relationships into the new context of a bout in *Brawl*. Lisa references a possible emotional relationship between the characters in another game as a playful verbal defense to get Jason to leave her character alone, playing on the “helpless female” stereotype. Jason retorts with a humorous and cynical take on the characters' relationship, and then adds insult to injury by calling Lisa's character a “tease.” Lisa did not take offense to the comment, but instead laughed. She took it as an attack on the character, not on her own actions or her position as a woman.

There were some people in the lounge that did not play *Brawl.* This meant that not everyone found playing the game enticing or enjoyable, but they did enjoy the banter that they could participate in around *Brawl* in the lounge. Janelle, whom I often saw talking or reading while other people were playing *Brawl* had no desire to play, but liked that the game play in the 5N lounge had made the space more social:

> Interviewer: Doesn't it bother you that there are games going on?
> Janelle: I like the noise, it brings more people out to the lounge.
> Interviewer: Do you like watching the games?
> Janelle: Occasionally, but usually I have a book to read, which is much more interesting. My effects are better than their effects. (Points to her head.)

From Janelle's comments we see playing digital games might not be everyone's favorite activity,

but that the performative way they are played in 5N invited other people to engage with them. Participants have created a form of digital game play that fits within a broader social context. Their performative, low stakes play in the lounge did not make non-players feel excluded and often, drew others into the socializing around the game without having to play.

Role of competition

The trash talk and witty banter that took place in the 5N lounge were playful ways for the students to compete with each other. Most of the students enjoyed coming up with witty comments or laughing at light-hearted insults directed at characters. However, many students also found pleasure in winning. Students in 5N often expressed their enjoyment of winning or disappointment in losing, but the type of competition that was present in the lounge was different than other more high stakes contexts.

Jenson and de Castell (2008) have suggested that "the very idea of 'competition,' for example, is both gendered and contestable" (p. 17). They go on to show in their own research of girls who play digital games, that as players, girls are very much competing and enjoying it, but that it is a different kind of competition that is typically associated with game play. They use the term "benevolent competition" to explain how the girls compete with one another while also "supporting, encouraging, and even helping their playmates to succeed in the game" (p.17). In another article, Jenson, de Castell, and Fisher (2007) described this kind of competition they observed in a group of girls playing the video game *Super Monkey Ball* as:

> ...never too direct, always somewhat supportive and rarely (in only one case in all the hours of video) meant to undermine the player who was ahead... When they did

> compete directly with one another, they would most often not comment on whether or not their competitor was a 'good' or 'poor' gamer, but would instead be more directly related to what was happening in the game at any given time. (p. 13)

Benevolent competition is very much what I observed in 5N, not strictly from the female players, but also from the male players. The 5N community was able to negotiate a type of competition that motivated players to play to the best of their abilities, but not to focus solely on whether they won or lost. This is opposed to a more individualistic type of higher stakes competition that makes who wins and loses the sole focus of attention.

Pat described the kind of competition that he perceived the lounge to have:

> I don't know if we're that competitive. No one really has the reputation to be tarnished or gotten. It's not like there's one person who's the best, and if you beat that person you're the best. Everyone's good and everyone has wins and losses...If I'm on my game and I'm playing the character I know, I'm pretty good. I'm easily defeated though. We're not competitive like “Ha ha, I defeated you that's great!” It's more like, that's cool, let's play again.

With this kind of competition in the 5N lounge, failure was not something to be ashamed of, it was an inevitable part of playing the game. It was not intertwined with the players’ identities in the group. Jenson, de Castell, and Fisher (2007) found this to be a major difference between the all-girl and all-boy groups they observed playing video games in their study:

> In contrast to the girls, the boys actively undermined one another, referred to each other as good or poor gamers and established and maintained a hierarchy of more and less proficient players on any given game. For the boys, much more so than the girls, their game play was connected to their identity: they were good or bad, skilled or not skilled, and/or a winner or loser. Because their very *identity* as a game player was at stake when they played, their comments to one another, their banter, was often biting and cruel. (p. 14)

What's more important about how the groups competed is not whether it was boys or girls

participating in an undermining type of competition, but whether winning or losing defined how a player was seen by the other players. Jenson et al. were not trying to map types of competition to one gender, but, instead, they wanted to draw attention to the relationship between identity construction and the stakes of winning a game. Identity is shaped by how a player sees him or herself, but also by their social context – by how other players come to see them. If a group decides they only value members that win, that view will influence how the players define one another and themselves. If players decide that what matters is *how* someone plays the game, then it will create a different kind of relationship between the players.

In the 5N community, there was not a strictly adhered to hierarchy related to their game play. There was a general understanding of who won games more than others, but the students also valued players who told the best jokes or made the play fun for others. The results of a bout in *Brawl* rarely became related to other bouts or to players' understanding of each other as valued members of the community. The gaming would continue on another weekend night and players would keep trying to win if they wanted to, but it did not define their role in the group. Players came to be known for how social they were, how they contributed to the conversation that goes on around the gaming, and how they added to the playful mood of the lounge.

This emphasis on being social led to a more relaxed approach to how people played the game. In this environment, where winning was not necessarily needed to be considered a valued member of the group, there were more flexible roles to be played by participants. Some

students picked characters to play in *Brawl* that they thought would enable them to win. Other students played characters they thought had funny moves so that they could be the comic relief during the game. More experienced players sometimes picked a character they were less familiar with in order to make the bout more challenging for themselves. These more flexible roles allowed for a more diverse group of players to participate. Even those who weren't as experienced in the game could contribute to the activity by making the process more social or enjoyable for the others players or the people watching the game.

Card games

The students' interactions during the video game *Brawl* were very similar to those during non-digital gaming. I observed the students playing two card games in the lounge – a Chinese trick-taking game called *Tractor* and an English version of an Italian card game called *Bang!*. These games were very different in structure, but both had aspects that allowed the students to socialize in a playful and performative way. As with *Brawl*, they were played in a low-stakes manner. The card games were competitive in a way that was similar to *Brawl*, whereby players trash talked during the game. This behavior, however, did not carry over into the social life of the lounge after the game ended. Also, the game actions were motivated by the "game as experience" and "game as social event" frames, which meant the group emphasized the process of playing over the end results.

As opposed to digital games, it should not be a surprise that card games can be extremely social. Parlett (1990) has said about card games:

> [An] attraction of card games is that they are playable by any reasonable number. For centuries they have proved a uniquely sociable activity against the alternatives of two player games requiring exclusive concentration...Playing-cards, perhaps partly for their aesthetic qualities, have always appealed as much to women as to men, and their sociable nature is enhanced by the fact that whole games consist of relatively brief part-games with opportunities for talk and relaxation in between. (p. 25)

The ability for card games to facilitate social interaction is called into question less often than digital games, which have a stigma of being isolating. The reason for discussing card games in this chapter is that they were popular forms of gaming in the lounge and they also attracted some female players who did not play digital games.

In 5N, the students who played card games varied somewhat from those who played *Brawl,* and not everyone who played *Bang!* played *Tractor*. The game with the most player overlap with *Brawl* was the card game *Bang!*. The rules of *Bang!* are simple, but the deck is unique and made up of many different cards. *Bang!* is based on the "spaghetti Western" film genre made popular by Sergio Leoni. As one might guess from the name *Bang!*, the basic premise of the game is to shoot other players. It is not a cooperative game, but instead sets each player against the others. This makes its player structure similar to the *brawl* mode 5N favored in *Brawl.*

In *Bang!,* each player is dealt a role card – *Sheriff*, *Renegade*, *Outlaw* or *Deputy*. They must also choose a specific character from three other cards they are dealt, each of which offers certain abilities like being able to draw extra cards or attack more than others. Each player has a certain number of life points that can be taken away when other players play a "*Bang*!" card on them. Players take turns drawing cards, taking actions using cards in their hand, and then

discarding excess cards. The game ends when the person playing the *Sheriff* is killed. Points are distributed according to who is then left alive. If the *Sheriff* is left alive and all the *Outlaws* and the *Renegade* are killed, the *Sheriff* and any live *Deputies* receive points.

When 5N plays *Bang!,* it is a social event. After several visits I had heard about the game but never seen it played. Finally, one night Pat suggested we play it. First, Pat explained the rules in detail to me, going through each card in the deck. I had heard from others that he was particularly good at explaining rules. This was one of the only times I interacted with him that he was completely serious. When the game began though, so did the jokes. Pat and Lisa described in more detail the purpose of *Bang!*:

> Pat: ...*Bang!* is just opportunities for jokes.
> Interviewer: People who are less into complex games and jokes play *Bang*? It's more light-hearted?
> Pat: Yeah, *Bang!* is definitely more light-hearted. Even though it's about killing people.
>
> Lisa (via email): For one thing, *Bang!* allows us to make sex jokes without needing a proper excuse haha. It's also different from most card games in the way that it's more like a board game than an actual card game that you can just play with any deck. It's a mix of people who play *Smash* as well as other people who just hang out in the lounge. It's fun mostly because the people playing are over-the-top and amiable as well.

Bang! is a game, but it also offers the students material to inspire jokes and conversations. In the same way that students might have sat around and talk about a TV show or movie, the students sat around to talk and joke about what was happening in the game. Lisa explained that people played "over-the-top" which made the game play more entertaining for both the players and anyone who happened to be around in the lounge.

As Jakobsson & Akira (2007) found in the console gaming club in Sweden, it is not just the rules

of the game that matter, but also the rules set by the cultural and social context. In 5N, they added some of their own rules to the game to make it more fun. For instance, there is a card called “Can-Can” that allows a player to take one card from every player. The students in 5N added their own rule that when anyone played this card, everyone had to get up and do an actual can-can line dance. When we played I had to leave before the game was over and the players decided to do the can-can anyway just so I could see it. About ten of us, both people playing and not playing in the lounge, lined up along the hall and quickly coordinated a 30-second can-can line, which in turn led to much laughter.

Bang! is not a simple game; it has many different actions and multiple strategies you can take during play. The students in 5N have played it enough times that they know most of the actions without having to read the explanations on the cards, allowing them to make jokes during the game about the play or anything else that comes up during the game. A lot of the talk was about things that had happened previously to someone in the group or interactions with people who walked by. At one point, a couple of the students broke into a funny song. While we played, the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics was on the TV, which added material for commentary and jokes during the game.

Bang! was the game that almost everyone in the lounge played. It was played less often than *Brawl,* but it appealed to a wider audience. *Bang!* did not require any previous experience or hand-eye coordination like most digital games do, but it did require more of a time commitment than *Brawl* because of its longer format. The opportunities for jokes and conversation were constant throughout the game because players could talk with other players

or other people in the lounge while the person whose turn it was decided on their next move. While some of the students said to me that the game is “simple,” it involves a unique deck that must be learned and certainly requires strategy to stay in the game and win. There was no singular reason why this game appealed to the widest group of players, but it facilitated playful social interaction by acting as the catalyst for jokes, offering moments between turns where student could socialize with other players and others in the lounge, and requiring no technological skill.

The more complicated card game, *Tractor*, was played by a slightly different group of people in the lounge, but also fit with the social goals of the group. I observed two games of *Tractor* happening at once one night in the lounge. The gender ratio of one game was split almost evenly between male and female players, but the other game had only one woman player. What was striking, though, was that almost all of the players were Asian American. It was not obvious why this was to me until later when I was told that *Tractor* is a Chinese card game. Pat explained, in an email, how the game came to 5N one summer when only some of the students were around and why it may be more popular with Asian American students:

> Pat: I think [an Asian American male student] was the one who brought it to [the dorm]. Lots of Chinese parents play card games like *Tractor*, and he happened to learn from his parents and passed it on to us. For me, it's fun and enjoyable to play because it reminds me of playing card games with my parents; it has kind of a nostalgic feel to it, with tons of inside jokes and laughs mixed in...The manner in which Chinese people see *Tractor* and related games (*Mahjong*, *Dou Dizhu*, etc.) is that they expect family and close family friends to sit around a table, eating sunflower seeds and drinking tea (or beer, sometimes) and have a few laughs and talk about anything. The Chinese kids came into this game setting with that kind of feeling, and it's been pretty similar; we're all really close and the game is a way for us to express our closeness. Even for the non-Chinese members of our *Tractor* group, I believe that they feel the same way.

Pat explained that there is a deep cultural and familial connection to this kind of social card game for many of the students in the lounge who are Chinese American. They have grown up understanding that playing the game is a reason to interact with friends and family. It should be noted that the game started in the lounge when those who might have been excluded were away for the summer. While Pat was willing to explain the game to them, they might have felt that it was it's not worth trying to catch up to the skill level of the other players since it was a more complicated and strategic game than *Brawl* or *Bang!.*

Bang! was complicated for me the first time I tried to play it because I was unfamiliar with all the possible actions, and it would have taken time to become familiar with the content. *Tractor* is complicated in a different way. It is played with traditional playing cards, but the rules are long and complex.[16] Some students who played *Brawl* and *Bang!* said that they didn't play *Tractor* because it was too complicated.

> Lisa: I don't play trick card games because I'm a fan of simplicity over complexity in my games. If it takes me too long to learn and get good at it's not fun, and games should be fun.

It could be that these students were less familiar with this kind of game. Jason is Asian American and he preferred digital games involving strategy to trick-taking card games that were too "complex." Lisa is African American and grew up playing cards with her dad, but the kind of

[16] The basic premise of *Tractor* is that players play in pairs, sitting across the table from each other, trying to win tricks. In any given hand there is a *defender* pair of players and an *attacker* pair or pairs – the defenders usually being the pair that lost the last hand. If the attacker pair wins a trick that contains a king, ten, or five card, those get added to a pile on the side. These cards count as points. If at the end of the hand the points are less than 80, the defenders gain overall points. If the points are more than 80 the attackers gain overall points. The overall points start at three and can increase or decrease each hand. The overall points increase by number and then up through J, K, Q, and Ace. Most players declare a winner when a pair reaches Ace or modify the rules to stop sooner or later.

complexity involved in *Bang!* and *Tractor* did not appeal to her. What was more important was that *Tractor* was not the only gaming option available in 5N and both Jason and Lisa were able to find other games to participate in.

Even if someone didn't like playing *Tractor* or *Bang!* in 5N, they could still be involved in the activity because, like the other games played in 5N, it was a performative and social activity. The first time I encountered *Tractor* I ended up watching and talking to the people playing for about 30 minutes with Lisa. My field notes from that night captured the scene:

> When we arrived upstairs the scene was quite different from what I had seen two weeks before. This time no one was playing video games. It was around 9:30pm and the majority of the action was happening on the side of the lounge that was farthest from the TV. Two groups, one seated at a round table and the other around a coffee table, were playing very vocal, fast-paced card games. The students were mostly Asian American with a three girl/three boy split at the round table and a one girl/five boy split at the coffee table. The most vocal players were Mei, who seemed to be running the game at her table, Jessica and Pat, who were playing at her table, and [a female student I hadn't interviewed], who was the only girl at the other table. There was one guy at the coffee table that would shout out to the other table every once in a while.
>
> Lisa and I stood by the round table and tried to figure out what they were playing. ...Mei was said to be “on stage” at one point, which I don't think was a technical term from the game, but she did seem to be leading the actions of the game in some way and was aggressively vocal in a way that reinforced her position. Her words weren't usually directed at any person, but more so were used to mention how well she was doing...
>
> While the card game was intense, there was a fair amount of conversation and activity going on that seemed unrelated. Several times while Lisa and I stood there for about 30 minutes, someone broke out in song. Some of the songs I didn't know, but they were mainly funny songs from musicals. At one point, Pat raised his hand and yelled, “Fiddler on the Roof! Yeah!” and high fived a guy behind him. He then sang part of a song from *Fiddler*, in what most people would probably consider a good singing voice, with a fair amount of sincerity. ...There were at any given time 3-5 people standing over the games or milling around the lounge. These people would try to follow the play or converse with the players when they could. Because the games were so lively, even if you didn't know everything was going on, you could still watch the dynamics of the game and listen to the witty banter and be entertained...

At this point in my research, I hadn't heard much about people playing cards in the lounge. I was surprised that no one was playing video games, but recognized that the way the students played cards was very similar to how they played *Brawl* even if some of the players were different. Some of the most vocal players were also the most vocal players of *Brawl* – Mei, Pat, and Jessica. Though the female students were fewer than male students, all of the women playing were very vocal and, as I say in my notes, Mei was obviously dominating her game. She was trash talking similarly to how she and other players did in *Brawl*. She wasn't disparaging other players, but was making exaggerated statements about how good she was at the game, playing up her role as the best player.

The performance of the players, whether it was provoked by the game or not, created a spectacle for non-players to watch or interact with throughout the game play. Sometimes people came to the lounge to see what was going on, but sometimes they were just passing by in the hallway on their way a dorm room. They could be entertained by listening to witty banter, join in when players broke into song, or try to figure out what was happening with the game. The game provided a structure for interaction in the lounge that not only included the players of the game, but also those watching the game.

This interaction was not strictly regulated to matters of the game, it was intertwined with socializing about shared interests. The game players were the center of attention, but were not relegated to a impenetrable *magic circle*, a concept developed and employed by game scholars to explain a bounded off space, in which a game occurs that keeps it separate from and subject

to different rules than ordinary life (Huizinga, 1955; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Consalvo (2009) has argued that this concept of a magic circle "upholds structuralist definitions or conceptualizations of games. It emphasizes form at the cost of function, without attention to the context of actual gameplay" (p. 411).

In the 5N lounge, there was almost constant interaction between the game players and their social context. There was no sense that the people playing the game were not involved with the other activities going on in the lounge. Instead, they were just as integrated into the socializing as someone who was cooking, doing homework, or surfing the web. Consalvo has suggested, "What if, rather than relying on structuralist definitions of what is a game, we view a game as a contextual, dynamic activity, which players must engage with for meaning to be made. Furthermore, it is only through that engagement that the game is made to mean" (p. 411). This is how I came to understand the role of games in the lounge. They were more than just rules, playing cards, or a Wii disc. They were part of a larger network of activities and social interactions, sometimes occurring even beyond the lounge, that influenced one another and that students moved fluidly between.

Motivations for game play

I have shown that winning and losing were not the most important elements of playing games in 5N, instead it was more valued to engage in the playful social interaction that goes on during and in between the games, specifically through witty banter that engaged players, as well as the other students in the lounge. The students' trash talking was motivated by action in the

game, but took place outside of the formal game structure. It became an integral part of the play process.

Going back to Juul's (2010) considerations for game action motivations we can better understand how the social goals of 5N interacted with the game structure. The orientation towards a goal was not completely gone, as the players were still trying to beat one another, but out of the three considerations, winning was the least emphasized by the group. As the game became more integrated into the network of other activities and socializing of the lounge, players' motivations shifted away from the "game as goal orientation" and more towards "game as experience" and "game as social event."

This is also not to say that the weight of the considerations didn't vary at the individual level. Mei might have valued winning a *Brawl* bout in 5N more than I would have as a researcher because I was trying to secure my relationships with the players in 5N. In this scenario, Mei would be more focused on the game as "goal orientation" – winning the game – and I would have been more concerned with the game as "social event." These differing motivations would result in two very different playing styles during the same game. In general there were multiple motivations at work at any given time. There was an overall shared understanding of the social goals of the group, which all players took into consideration while playing. There were also individual motivations at work, that when combined with the social goals of the group created a range of actions that kept the play acceptable and appealing to all involved.

The question remains of why choose games as a way of socially interacting? Flanagan (2009) has proposed that games can also be seen as *social technologies* that function "as an ordering logic...for creating social relations, [they] work to distill or abstract the everyday actions of the players into easy-to-understand instruments where context is defamiliarized just enough to allow Huizinga's magic circle of play to manifest" (p.9). I have questioned the existence of an impenetrable magic circle above, but what Flanagan points out is that games are a way of facilitating social interaction that orders and abstracts every day activities and interactions. Students gathered in the lounge during the evening and on weekends to have an experience that was different from doing classwork or taking care of other responsibilities. In the lounge, gaming was engaging and social, but low stakes and inclusive.

Many MIT students are high achievers and hard workers, and games are a way to continue feeling this sense of productivity, but without the pressure of being graded. Rachel explained:

> I guess it's the MIT culture that we like to be constantly busy. When you watch a movie you're not accomplishing anything. This is my mindset, I don't know if it fits in with other people. I feel like if I'm not actively doing something or accomplishing something, then I feel like its a waste of my time...I feel like taking breaks where I don't do anything, for me is very irritating, cause then I feel like I'm actually wasting time. I feel guilty about it. Like when I'm taking a break and I can say I gained five levels on this game, I can feel like I accomplished something...after a long days work and you want to come home and take your anger out on something, then like *Smash* or something is the perfect game to play.

Rachel blurred the line between play and work. She used games to take a break, but chose them over other activities because they felt more productive. Her view may not have been representative of all students, but it does make sense that the students in the 5N lounge might have seen games as a valuable social activity because they allowed participants to feel a sense

of accomplishment or value.

Conclusion

The 5N community chose certain digital and non-digital games that could facilitate playful socializing. Their choice of games is important, but so is the way that they played them and fit them into the social context of the lounge. The presence of different games offered different modes of entry to gaming for a group of students with different experience levels and preferences. Some students were drawn to a game because of previous experience or nostalgia, as was the case with Lisa and *Brawl* or Pat and *Tractor*. Janelle had no experience with digital games and expressed no interest in playing them, but she was able to participate in the conversation around *Brawl* and found pleasure in playing the card game *Bang!*.

Also, the games played were flexible enough in structure that they could be aligned with the social goals of the community. Many of the games' structural elements lowered barriers to participation and helped to maintain an inclusive gaming environment. In *Brawl*, there were modes that offered different playing experiences, a large pool of characters to choose from, simple controls, and optional items that could enhance player attacks. *Bang!* and *Tractor* had fixed formal rules, but offered an open enough structure that students could socialize between turns or add their own rules. The formal goals of each game were very clear, but didn't carry over into other game play sessions in a way that would create a hierarchy or deny access to players who lost.

Finally, the students in the lounge chose games that could be played in a low-stakes, perfomative manner. The witty banter and trash talk provoked by the game actions socially engaged players with each other, but also with people in the lounge not playing the game. This allowed non-players to have a reason to participate in the gaming experience, without the pressure of winning or losing. Observers like me could become familiar with how games worked by engaging at the periphery and eventually become interested in playing. This kind of exposure to the different games in the lounge, in addition to mentoring from more experienced players, led to students who didn't play previously becoming players. The students who currently play encouraged non-players to join in for the experience, but also to make future game play more diverse and interesting.

Game structure can be more or less flexible and conducive to diverse groups of players, but it is not in a game's structure alone that inclusive gaming is created. As Consalvo (2009) said: "We cannot understand game play by limiting ourselves to only seeing actions and not investigating reasons, contexts, justifications, limitations, and the like. That is where the game occurs and where we must find its meaning" (p. 415). In the next chapter, I will further explore the context of gaming in the 5N lounge by examining the individual experiences, playing styles and motivations of the students who made up the community.

CHAPTER THREE: The Players

The members of the 5N community played digital and non-digital games together in the lounge, but they also played games outside of the lounge, with other groups of people, and on their own. I observed the students playing games in their rooms and on their laptops that were not the same games they played together in the lounge. The students had a range of preferences in the games they played and different styles of playing them. I found that the female players shared similarities in the way they were introduced to playing digital games, but from that moment on their trajectories usually varied. My observations and interviews with the 5N community show that gaming preferences and styles are too situated and complex to be mapped to gender alone.

The players in 5N also had different ways of identifying with gaming culture. Only one of the female players considered herself a “gamer.” The other women negotiated using the term “gamer” to identify themselves by adding modifiers, such as “casual” or “softcore,” or they rejected the label. The women's understandings of gamer were situated in their social context and related to their own experience level, as well as the experience levels of those around them. In this chapter, I show that women players enjoy playing a much wider range of games

than digital “girl games,” and that they continuously negotiate how they position themselves in digital gaming culture according to the prevailing gamer stereotypes.

Beginning to game

A recent Pew study (2008) suggested that high school-aged girls are the “least 'enthusiastic'” about playing video games out of U.S. teens. Because of the relatively low level of participation among female teens, I was particularly interested in interviewing women for my research who had continued playing digital games through high school. Investigating the reasons why many young women lose interest in digital games is beyond the scope of this paper, but I did attempt to understand how the students of the 5N community became interested in digital games, how they had sustained their interest in gaming through high school, and why they continued gaming in college.

I asked each of the students I interviewed, male and female, to tell me their gaming histories. Most of the students told me about the digital games they played in elementary school, middle school, and high school. Two of the students had shorter histories: Jessica, who started playing games in high school, and Janelle, who had never played digital games.

One significant pattern that emerged from the histories of the female students who began to game before high school, was that they typically played with male players while they were growing up. In the 1980s and 1990s boys were more likely to be playing digital games, and gaming was usually gendered male, as something boys do. Kline et al (2003) explain that the

game industry at this time "launched powerful and calculatedly gender based appeals" that combined with "the powerful pre-existing divisions that already segregate so many forms of entertainment...and with the overall male predominance in high-tech activities, (at least until very recently) relentlessly constructed the game-playing subject as male" (p. 257).

The women in 5N were discouraged from playing digital games to varying degrees depending on their social contexts. Some of their parents were more willing than others to support their daughters' gaming interests and provide access to gaming platforms. Most of the women were able to find groups of friends that accepted their interest in gaming, but they were usually majority male. Almost all of the women were introduced to gaming by a male family member or friend:

> Interviewer: When did you first start playing?
> Lisa: I think maybe around four or five [years old]. My dad had the Super Nintendo with the Mario games and *Pink Panther*. We played that like every night...
> Interviewer: But it was mostly your dad that introduced you to gaming?
> Lisa: Yeah my mom hated him for it though.

> Jessica: ...in Hawaii with my cousins, I played with them. They played *Halo*[17] a lot.
> Interviewer: Were they older?
> Jessica: One of them is older than me by like three years. His younger brothers a year younger than me. The other younger brother is like fifteen now.
> Interviewer: So they would play *Halo*? Did you ever play with them?
> Jessica: Sometimes, they let me play. I could probably beat two of the three...

This pattern of males introducing females to gaming also extended to many of the women I interviewed at MIT outside of 5N. They cited fathers, cousins, uncles and male friends as the first people who showed them digital games. Some of the female players recalled their mothers

[17] *Halo* is a series of first-person shooter games for Xbox and PC that can be play single or multiplayer. It is a popular game on the professional gaming circuit.

playing digital games together with their families, but none of the interviewees had a female player to mentor them while they were young.

One major factor in how women begin to play digital games is whether or not they have access to a gaming console. Schott and Horrell (2000) found in their study on girls and women who play digital games that even owning a console does not "always secure or determine girl gamers' relationship with their console," and that if males also had access to the console, the female players had to compete for access (p. 41). "[T]his situation was based upon a common perception, evident in all the discussions, that males are 'the experts' when it comes to knowing what is required and how it is achieved. In all cases, males constituted a vital frame-of-reference for girl gamers' gaming practices" (p. 41). While it is obviously possible for girls and women to play on consoles, there are perceptions, as Schott and Horrell mention, that frame playing digital games as something girls should not do and these beliefs obstruct female access to participation.

The perception of male players' default expertise, as shown by Kline et al., might be rooted in similar stereotypes in computing, which Margolis and Fisher (2002) have also found in their work in the field of computer science:

> Very early in life, computing is claimed as male territory. At each step from early childhood through college, computing is both actively claimed as "guy stuff" by boys and men and passively ceded by girls and women. The claiming is largely the work of a culture and society that links interest and success with computers to boys and men. (p. 4)

It is not a coincidence that the masculine gendering of computing carried over into digital

gaming in the 1980s and 1990s. Consoles were not generally framed as gaming platforms made for women until the recent introduction of the more feminine-coded Wii, which has a bright and sleek design, games geared towards family-themed play, and movement-based controls. As computer usage and digital gaming become more ubiquitous and diverse, they may become less gendered as masculine, but the women of 5N grew up at a time when being a girl playing digital games was not the norm. As I explained in Chapter One, the women of the 5N community sometime act as mentors to other female players. It remains to be seen if female players are more likely to introduce digital games to the next generation of players.

While the number of women who play digital games overall, especially handheld and online games, appears to be approaching – in some cases exceeding – the number of men who play, it is still the case that girls are less likely to have access to a gaming console (Entertainment Software Association, 2009; Pew, 2008). The women I interviewed had a mix of experiences with owning a console. Some had to compete for time playing with siblings or other family members; others had full access; and others had to negotiate with their parents around gaming:

> Rachel: ...I visited relatives in Seattle, and they had a Sega Genesis. It was amazing to me because I had never played video games...I had played pinball on father's computer, but that doesn't really count. My cousins were like, "Here play this game, its really cool."...I don't even know what I'm doing, I just button mashed...It was *Sonic the Hedgehog*...after that I was like "Dad I really want a Sega Genesis"...And he got me one for my fifth birthday. I played religiously like once a week...It became a family affair...My father would play, my mom would attempt to play. It was a family bonding experience. You could not save games then so we'd spend seven hours trying to win.
>
> Mei: Yeah, I had a Game Boy, and I had *Pokemon Red*...My friend, he had *Pokemon Blue* and we just traded...and then my mom gave away my Game Boy. She said, "You play too much on it" and she gave it away. And then I didn't have any portable consoles

> after that.... I got a Wii for free. I was happy. It was a congratulations-on-getting-into-MIT gift...My parents were like, “We want to sell this.” I was like, “You can't sell other people's gifts.” There were like, “Fine, but we're not buying you games”...I ended up convincing them to buy me two games.

These passages show a discrepancy in access. Rachel said she was able to convince her parents at a young age to get a gaming system. She then had access to a console, but it was shared by the family and played more by her father than her mother. Mei had a portable device to play games on, but once her parents decided she was using it too much, they took it away. They also tried to get rid of her Wii, showing little appreciation for the importance of gaming for their daughter. In both cases, parents played significant roles in granting and maintaining access to gaming consoles for girls. PopCap.com (2010), a popular casual gaming site, found in a survey that “parents and grandparents are 55 per cent more likely to discourage the playing of ‘hardcore’ games [violent first person shooters and horror-themed games] by girls aged 14-years-old and under, compared to boys of the same age.” Parents' opinions about their daughters who play games on consoles are still closely tied to broader existing perceptions of what girls should and should not do. Because “hardcore” games, are often associated with console gaming, this could lead parents to discourage girls from owning or playing with consoles.

For Mei, it was not a family member who introduced her to games; it was her male friends. She was a recent immigrant to Montana from China, and she was very aware of being one of the few non-white people in the area. Her male friends exposed her to gaming at a young age:

> Mei: When I first came to America, I went to Montana. There are like no Asians there. Whatever. There was nothing except for white people there...I traveled a lot because I was on swim team, but never saw one non-white person. Well I started playing when I

> was about eight, I think. My best friends were all guys and they played video games. I mean I had friends who were girls but they weren't that girly either. Like, the only friends I had that were girls were the people on my basketball team. And I just played lots of games.

Mei expressed self-reflexive insights about her racial and gender awareness in this quote. She moved to a place where she felt out of place because everyone else was "white." She implied that this feeling of difference outweighed any concern about hanging out with peers of the opposite gender. Mei didn't explicitly explain why, but her main group of friends was primarily male, and they focused on gaming. Her friendships with girls were developed through a form of non-digital gaming – basketball.

The fact that Mei and the other women of 5N played with groups of boys when they were growing up is not typical among elementary and middle school-aged children. At that stage of development, boys and girls do befriend each other, but it has been shown that it is more common for children to be part of same-gender friend groups. Thorne (1993) found this in a study of elementary and middle school students at play in school settings: "[A]lthough girls and boys *are* together and often interact in classrooms, lunchrooms, and on the playground, these contacts less often deepen into friendships or stable alliances, while same-gender interactions are more likely to solidify into more lasting or acknowledged bonds" (p. 47).

Thorne (1993) has offered a conceptual framework for thinking about children's cross-gender interactions. First, she explained *borderwork*, which occurs when boys and girls interact in ways that "strengthen their borders...and evoke recurring themes that are deeply rooted in our cultural conceptions of gender, and they suppress awareness of patterns that contradict and

qualify them" (pp. 64, 66). She cited an example of a time when boys disrupt girls who are playing jump rope and try to change the terms of the activity to their own by swinging the rope too hard or in a different way.

Thorne then discusses *crossing*, a less common action that occurs when a "girl or boy may seek access to groups and activities of the other gender...with the intent of full participation in the activities and on the terms of the groups..." (p. 121). Crossing is akin to what the women in 5N were doing when they played games with their male friends. They had an earnest interest in playing the games and were willing to participate along with the terms of the group. In high school, the women of 5N continued crossing as they played digital games with majority male groups of friends. Lisa, for example, brought her GameCube to school one day and helped create an ongoing group activity to share with her male friends. They found empty classrooms during free time and played *Smash Bros.*:

> Interviewer: So that was a social event or it was focused on watching the game?
> Lisa: Just social, a way to spend our free period. It started out because before junior and senior years we didn't have any cars and we couldn't do anything with our free periods. So I'd bring games to school. ...
> Interviewer: Was it a good mix of boys and girls?
> Lisa: I was the only girl in the room.
> Interviewer: Really? Did that bother you?
> Lisa: It wasn't that different 'cause I had grown up around guys 'cause my dad brought me up as the little boy he never had. (Laughs) So I was always playing basketball or football with him when I wasn't playing [digital] games with him. I mostly always grew up doing guy things. I hated *Barbies* and dresses. Just playing with guys wasn't that strange for me.

Lisa recalled her experiences playing with her father to normalize her experience playing digital games with a group of male students. Most high school girls might find the situation Lisa describes to be awkward, but negotiating this social terrain came easy to Lisa, because she was

able to translate the way she played with her father to how she played with her male friends. Lisa took part in what Thorne (1993) describes as a *complicated continuum* of crossing (p. 112). Thorne offers this continuum as an alternative to using binary descriptors such as “sissy” and “tomboy.” Lisa crossed into a masculinized context of video gaming with an earnest interest and the ability to sustain participation. Thorne notes that successful “crossers” are those who “persevere in spite of the risk of being labeled or teased” (p. 130). An important part of Lisa's ability to cross into this all male group was that she controlled access to the gaming because the console they played on was hers.

Rachel also played with a group of male students in high school. They were not her only group of friends (she had a more gender-balanced group of friends from her science lab), but she enjoyed her time with the boys. While noting that the activities she engaged in with her male friends were different from the ones she participated in with her female friends, she found both situations appealing:

> Rachel: For high school, if I played with other people it was either RPGs or first person shooters.
> Interviewer: You played them at school?
> Rachel: Played them mostly in school. We didn't play them much outside of school, mostly because I was busy. I did science research and stuff. I've been to one or two LAN parties with my guy friends. That was an experience.
> Interviewer: Why? Did you enjoy them?
> Rachel: It was really enjoyable. It's just I've never been in a setting where it's just purely guys and maybe like one other girl. When I go to other people's houses it’s like a girl party, do make-up and gossip, kind of stuff. So being with a bunch of guys seated in their living rooms, seated with the lights off, it was just kind of like a whatever environment. Nobody cared what each other looked like, it’s just intensely clicking.
>
> Interviewer: Did you feel like you had to act different? How did you deal with that?
> Rachel: I feel like in high school I was most comfortable hanging around guys. I felt like I could be myself around them, mainly because I was really opinionated and I was really

> crude. So with my guy friends, I was not so much allowed, but it was just natural. And they really didn't care. Like I could say something insulting as a joke and they wouldn't get offended over it. Whereas, if I did that with my girlfriends, there is probably a chance that they would get offended over that. Its like I had to censor myself around them.
> Interviewer: You didn't have to totally be a dude? Were you able to negotiate those things?
> Rachel: Yeah kind of. They kind of accepted me as the token girl in the bunch.

Rachel identified here more with the behavior of her male friends than her female friends. She exhibited the ability to negotiate two very different social groups and find pleasure in both. Her descriptions of the two groups were gendered, rendering her female friends as concerned with make up and gossip and her male friends as unconcerned with their appearance and focused more on games than communication.

Walkerdine (2006) has recognized the complex negotiations that must take place for girls who play games that have masculinized content or contexts:

> [M]any games are the site for the production of contemporary masculinity because they both demand and appear to ensure performances such as heroism, killing, winning, competition, action, combined with technological skill and rationality... My central claim is that in relation to girls, this constitutes a problem because contemporary femininity demands practices and performances which bring together heroics, rationality, etc. with the need to maintain a femininity which displays care, co-operation, concern, and sensitivity to others. This means that girls have complex sets of positions to negotiate while playing... (p. 520)

Walkerdine has problematized the relationship of female players to the often masculinized content and culture of video gaming. Rachel figured out how to negotiate between these two gendered contexts and participate in both. Does this make her more masculine? In some people's eyes, that would be the case. However, the more complex question is whether the assumption of masculine traits then makes her less feminine overall?

A study by Royse et al. (2007) found that women's notions of their "gendered self" are tied to their level of participation in game play (p. 573). For the women interviewed who played digital games over three hours per week, they found that "games and gender mutually constitute each other," meaning these women had fewer boundaries between their game play and "real life" than women who do not play games with the same frequency (p. 573). Though some women may undergo a complex performance of gender while playing digital games, many are able do so without jeopardizing their ability to be feminine. Their situated pleasures of being competitive or killing other players in a game do not, to them at least, threaten their ability to find pleasure in more feminized activities like socializing or grooming of appearance.

The way a community regulates gender roles is important because it can make participating in masculine gendered activities more or less possible for women. While most of the female players in the 5N community did not see a problem with their participation in differently gendered activities, it is possible that they have encountered social contexts where it was problematic for others. Rachel and Lisa were able to participate in groups that engaged in traditionally feminine practices and groups that engaged in traditionally masculine practices. What helped them develop this ability to negotiate both situations is too complex to draw solid conclusions about in this thesis, but it likely stems from a combination of the social context of each group they played with and their individual experiences with gaming. It is notable, however, that the negotiation between gender roles is an ability that has helped Lisa and Rachel sustain their participation in gaming, and other male-dominated environments, such as

those they likely encountered at MIT.

The undergraduate population at MIT is almost half female, but because of the greater number of male faculty and male graduate students, many departments still maintain more traditionally masculinized culture. This masculinized culture is different from the masculinity of male sports teams and of fraternities. It is instead a "geek" masculinity focused less on physical dominance than powers of technology, science, rationality, and intelligence. Margolis and Fisher (2002), in their study of computer science majors at Carnegie Mellon University, explained the influence of "geek" culture on people who participate in it, but do not identify with it:

> An exceptionally high level of obsession and expertise has become the expected norm and has raised the bar for the level of knowledge, interest, and expertise identified with computer science majors. For women, seeing most of their male peers as totally absorbed in computing, the fear that "I don't seem to *love* it as much as the men, and therefore I don't belong," lurks in many women's doubt. (p. 70)

The view that you need to be "obsessed" with computers or digital games to be accepted in the cultures that surround them is an obstacle to participation. People who work with computers or play digital games also have other interests. The women of 5N have helped cultivate a community where having other interests is the norm. Games are just one of many activities available for them to be active contributors to their community.

The women of the 5N community had experiences in male-dominated and highly gendered contexts, whether playing digital games or participating in computer science and physics classes in high school or at MIT. They are part of a particular population of women who have this set of experiences and have learned how to negotiate between groups of different genders. As the

focus of this thesis, they are not meant to represent women in general, but instead they stand as examples of women who have sustained an interest in video gaming through high school and into college despite the masculine stereotypes associated with it.

We have seen that the women interviewed came to digital gaming through different paths and have enjoyed playing a range of game genres. At a young age, all of the women were situated in groups of friends who played and shared knowledge about games. Boys were the primary members of the groups they played with, but this was due in part to circumstances in which boys were the only ones they *could* play digital games with. As Rachel said:

> [I]f you gave me the choice, would you rather play *DDR* [*Dance Dance Revolution*][18] or *Counter-Strike*[19]? I wouldn't have chosen *Counter-Strike,* but I guess the people I hung out with played that all the time and if you really wanted to game with them that's what you had to play. It was really fun. I sucked at FPS [first person shooter] games ...so it wasn't that I liked to play them competitively, or to be good at them, I play them more for the social aspect, to hang out with my guy friends.

For most of the women in 5N, their choices at a younger age were limited by access either to gaming platforms or to groups of friends to play with. All were able to find both, but these factors constrained how and what they played. Now, in college, some of these constraints have been lifted as they have access to more resources and more agency in their gaming decisions. They are able to negotiate their ways through various gaming contexts. How do these women, who now have more control over their own gaming contexts and practices, interact with their peers and with the games they play?

[18] *Dance Dance Revolution* is an arcade or console game that requires players to stomp on shapes under their feet along with the rhythm markers shown on the screen. It is often played solo, but some set-ups allow for competition between two players at once.

[19] *Counter Strike* is an extremely popular multiplayer first person shooter game that allows players to play on either a terrorist or anti-terrorist team.

Different Contexts, Different Modes of Play

While there were some common patterns in the gaming histories of the students who hang out in the 5N lounge – namely being introduced to games by male acquaintances and family members, playing with mostly male groups of players in high school, and feeling comfortable interacting in those groups – each of the students discussed different preferences for games, different ways of playing them, and different pleasures they experience while playing. These variations were often related to the players' social contexts at the time.

Carr (2005) has acknowledged the complex relationship between social contexts of gaming, gender, and players' preferences:

> Mapping patterns in preferences is possible but preferences are an assemblage, made up of past access and positive experiences and subject to situation and context. The constituents of preference (such as access) are shaped by gender and, as a result, gaming preferences manifest along gendered lines... To attribute gaming tastes directly, solely, or primarily to an individual subjects' gender is to risk underestimating the complexities of both identity and preference. (p. 479)

In addressing studies that have tried to ascribe gaming preferences to a gender, Carr recognizes that there is much more to understanding how players interact with games than can be attributed to any single factor, especially gender. Evidence from my research agrees with Carr's assertion that there is a back and forth relationship of influence between gender and gaming preferences that also is part of a larger network of previous experience and the context the game takes place in. I was not able to map their game preferences and playing styles along gender lines, or any one factor. Instead my interviewees preferences and styles changed

depending on how much experience they had, who they played with, and what technology was available to them.

There have been several attempts to categorize player types and playing styles. Bartle (1996) has studied MUDs (online, usually text-based virtual worlds) and identified four approaches to playing that “arise from the inter-relationship of two dimensions of playing style: action versus interaction, and world-oriented versus player-oriented” (p. 1). The four player types represent the possible intersections of these dimensions and are described as “achievers, explorers, socialisers, and killers” (p. 3). Bartle recognizes that these approaches can overlap depending on player mood, but that “many (if not most) players do have a primary style” (p. 3). In trying to make sense of the different playing preferences of the women and men I interviewed, however, I found these categories insufficient for explaining the range of motivations the students had for playing games. Yee (2006) expanded Bartle's player taxonomy in order to organize player motivations in MMORPG's. His findings resulted in ten motivation components that are closely tied to the mechanics and culture of MMORPG's. While the components offered a wider range of motivations for play, including *relationships*, *customization* and *role-playing*, they were too specific to the MMORPG genre of games to organize the player motivations in the 5N community.

In order to make sense of the diverse motivations and styles for the players in 5N, I adapted categories from Brown & Vaughan (2009), which are more specific than Bartle's, but not as specific to MMORPG's as Yee's framework. Brown & Vaughan call their categories *play*

personalities or *dominant modes of play* (p. 65). For this thesis, thinking of them as personalities is not helpful because no player strictly held to playing according to one over the other. Considering them as *modes* instead allows me to speak of the fluidity of styles of most of the students in 5N and include information about their changing behaviors according to what was being played, who else was playing, and where it was being played.

Brown & Vaughan's modes are not specific to digital games or games in general. They are related more generally to play. Since they are not tied to gaming contexts, they allow for the incorporation of open-ended types of play. They are not meant to be an exhaustive list of the way people can approach play, but they are helpful here to organize the gaming motivations, pleasures, and styles of the men and women I interviewed. Below I will use four modes that build upon those identified in Brown & Vaughan's work, j*oking around, competing, directing, and collecting,* along with one of my own, *socializing*.

Joking around

All of the students in 5N joked around, even those who didn't play games. As explained earlier, joking around was one of the most valued forms of interaction in the 5N lounge. Students told recurring jokes about characters while playing *Brawl* and participated in witty banter during movies or TV shows. Laughter was a constant presence in the lounge. The gaming in the 5N lounge took place in a playful environment where rules were stretched and modified to maintain a light-hearted and fun environment for all participants. Pat explained how the people in the lounge appreciated “funniness”:

Pat: We like things that are funny. We have a Facebook page where people post things

> they think are funny. We like things that are awesome. There's not a lot of TV watching, we watch a lot of *Family Guy*. If no one turns off the TV after *Family Guy,* we'll watch *Two and a Half Men*. Lot of people like *House*, but we rarely watch *House* on the TV because *House* is too serious. We don't want to influence people with seriousness.

Pat gave criteria for what is valued participation for the students in the lounge. If something is too "serious," it did not belong there. This is not to say that serious things did not happen in the lounge. As we saw earlier people did their homework, ate, and worked out group issues in the lounge, but always in a way that kept the mood in the space light-hearted and humorous. Often, these seemingly productive activities actually maintain a balance between play and work. Brown & Vaughan have proposed that "[t]he quality that work and play have in common is creativity...Play helps us deal with difficulties, provides a sense of expansiveness, promotes mastery of our craft, and is an essential part of the creative process" (p. 127). Students in the lounge playfully approached more serious tasks like cooking dinner or doing their homework to help each other explore new possibilities and solve difficult problems.

Competing

Several studies have hypothesized that female players are averse to playing competitively, or that competition is in conflict with "doing" a feminine gender. (Schott and Horrell, 2000; Walkderine, 2006) As I discussed above, Jenson and de Castell (2008) argue that competition is not incompatible with femininity, but that there are ways of being competitive, including *benevolent competition*, which can be constructed as more or less masculine or feminine (p. 17). Both the male and female players in 5N enjoy winning, but for most of them it is not the primary reason they play. Through joking banter and trash talk, most of the players relish in a winning moment, but they do not let the enjoyment of dominating the game linger much

longer. Rather, the group moves on to the next round, game or activity with the belief that anyone could win or lose next time.

Benevolent competition was not the only type of competition the female players were interested in. Competition came up in interviews with both Jessica and Mei, who each said that they had played digital games in other social contexts where fellow players had picked on them or made fun of them. The pleasure they got from winning in these situations was more intense. Each of them described a time she won while playing against people who had picked on her in the past:

> Jessica: Well, [a male player from downstairs] is a gamer definitely... There was one day I was really mad, so I dragged [him] and two others to 5N to play *Smash.* They're completely bad at it. So I cheered up because, dude, I'm beating up three big guys! (laughs) So, [he's] this buff, kind of scary looking guy. So I'm beating him and I'm like, "Yes!"
>
> Mei: ...I was really happy this one time because [two male players] always made fun of me. There was this really fat character in [*League of Legends,*a MMORPG]...and they're like, "You can't kill him ever." So me and two freshman, we did a two on two...and we like whooped their asses...and he was playing the really fat guy...and I killed him! Like 4 times, I was really happy. And they ended up surrendering. It was like eight to two. We won! Cause they kept on making fun of me for being a crappy player, and I was like, "pwned[20] your asses!"

Both women took pleasure in having defeated someone who had teased or made fun of them in the past. They took on more competitive personalities because there was more at stake for them. They had a reason to want to prove themselves as skillful to the other players. These instances were different contexts from the play they usually engaged in while playing in the 5N lounge, where there was less emphasis on winning.

[20] The word "pwned" is most often used in Internet and digital gaming contexts to mean that you beat someone.

Directing

Mei and Pat were both named by other interviewees as leaders in the 5N group – though they had very different styles. They were usually the students directing the socializing around the games being played. Pat was mentioned a few times as "Andres 0.9," – a joke that acknowledges the influence Andres had on forming the exuberant, trash talking style of playing games in the lounge. The "0 .9" plays on the way most software is named when it progresses into a newer version. In this case, however, Pat is deemed "Andres 0.9" instead of "2.0" because Andres was such a big personality to replace in the community.

Playing with traditional gender roles, Rachel explained how Pat and Mei are often seen as having two very different ways of directing the community:

> We often joke that Mei is our father figure and Pat is our mother figure. Cause Pat's more like, he focuses more on the social aspect and making sure everybody's having fun, whereas Mei's like, "No you must be good, you must be really good."

Rachel presented Mei and Pat as leaders, but in ways that resembled the traditional roles of the opposite gender. Mei was seen as a coach in the community – someone who pushed other students to play to the best of their abilities. Pat was the social leader, directing conversations, suggesting activities for the group to do, and making sure everyone was having a good time. They were performing roles that traditionally have been associated with the opposite gender – the male student as the caring mother, the female student as the "tough loving" father. In the 5N lounge, gender roles were played with and were not held as rigidly as in other communities. The consequences of doing something traditionally associated with another gender were low.

Collecting

Rachel was the player who most explicitly expressed an interest in collecting. She was able to find pleasure in accumulation by playing *Pokemon*, a game that includes hundreds of characters that players can search for and capture for their collections.

> Rachel: I'm a huge collector...I'm probably OCD [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder] about collecting. I'm a packrat. I guess that aspect of the game and how there's like a set way to progress through the game, but there's a lot of deviations throughout the game. You have to go through all of them and get badges, try to get through *Pokemon League* and collect them all, but there's a lot of side games you can delve into and hidden items and tweaks in the game. It's really fun to go through and find them all. Especially back then when we didn't have any walk-throughs. It really was just an exploration process, and I think that was a huge part of our social gaming.

For Rachel, *Pokemon* offered her a mixed pleasure of exploring and collecting. She self-identified as a "pack rat" a term most often used to describe the collection of physical objects. She enjoyed both the collecting of the characters in-game and the *Pokemon*-related figurines out-of-game. The act of collecting is not just a pleasure in-and-of itself though. The *Pokemon* characters one collects in the game can help one advance, because a stronger group of characters will help a player win battles.

There exists a blurry line in games between collecting for the pleasure it brings, and collecting items, coins, or points to progress in the game – often called "achieving." Jason described how he used his time playing alone to do this:

> Jason: If I'm by myself, I end up achievement hunting cause it's something to do when the story is over...I'll play again just to twiddle...without a direction, no end goal. You get the feeling that you could be doing something much more productive. Part of the appeal of the achievements and their analogs in general, because it gives you something to aim for, 'specially in cases like *Brawl* or *Halo*. You're always striving to get better, but

that feels like work a lot of the time.
Interviewer: So achievement is good when you're on your own?
Jason: Yeah, it's less important when I'm playing socially, 'cause the fun shifts to being more related to the company. The interaction there, because it's a shared experience you can talk about it, respond to each other you can critique or compliment each other, it's not so much about killing time.

Jason explained how he could have different pleasures in the same game depending on his social context – with other people or alone. This kind of achieving might lead to a slippage between play and work, as we saw above with Rachel's explanation of how she plays games when she wants to take a break from homework in order to feel a sense of accomplishment. This approach actually changed from when she was in high school:

> Rachel: I was not like that in high school. When I gamed in high school it was for actual entertainment. Like, I wanted to play *DDR* or *Pokemon* for the sake of playing *Pokemon*. Not like, I need a break, now I should play *Pokemon*.

Collecting can be pleasurable in and of itself, but it can also become work-like and competitive, and in such instances it reveals the productive fluidity of Brown & Vaughan's categories. We often think about play as the opposite of work, but Brown & Vaughan (2009) actually saw play and work as "mutually supportive." They argued that people need both the "newness of play" and the "purpose of work" (p. 126). For Rachel, the context of MIT, which places value on being "constantly busy," – influenced her view that gaming is not a waste of time like watching a movie. Whereas she used to play for the "sake of playing," Rachel now sees playing as a way of accomplishing during a break from schoolwork. Rachel still plays the same game, but now she has a different motivation because of her new context.

Socializing

The most popular reason for gaming among all the people I interviewed in 5N, male and

female, was to socialize with other people.

> Rachel: The thing that made *Rock Band* so appealing to me was that it was a community effort. If I had started playing it by myself, I probably wouldn't have liked it, and I still don't like playing by myself, but when I play with my friends, it's really fun. One of my friends, Mei, kind of drilled it into us, 'cause she's kind of hardcore about *Rock Band*.
>
> Interviewer: What are the game genres you like?
> Jason: ...Typically offline, even [games] with strong online communities I'll play offline. Partly because of the time and the community I don't find compelling. Being in college you are surrounded by community already. It's much more engaging to talk to people your age, your level, with whom you have a lot in common, don't see necessity of going online. Especially since you're surrounded by game play so people get fixated on that. Becomes harder to talk to people that way...Rhythm games too, I like *Rock Band*, I get a kick out of it. It has a participatory aspect to it.

Rachel and Jason express how much they enjoy playing a game collaboratively with others. This is especially true of games like *Rock Band* where players can help or "save" one another while working towards a common goal of completing a song or earning more points. Lisa and Jessica also realized that they play differently when they are around others. Something that could be mundane when playing alone becomes performative and more fun with a group of friends:

> Lisa: I definitely get into [*Rock Band*] sometimes. I just start wailing randomly and not actually playing the real notes. But when you're singing it will actually help the group, it will be better social atmosphere in the room if you actually act out your singing and stuff or when you're playing guitar if you dance.
>
> Jessica: ...as I said I'm mostly a social gamer. If there's nobody playing, I'm not going to play...like some of my high school friends; they still play because they have online friends. I just never felt very comfortable with that... It's just boring. I go on *Conquer*...if I'm bad at something I can go kill a bunch of things...but in the end, there's nothing accomplished, no social interaction...And I'm just like, I don't see the point...I guess *Smash* is like that; go kill these three people; but it's more than that. You've heard us play...

Jessica referred to the witty banter and trash talking that went on when more than one person played *Brawl* in the lounge. *Brawl* bouts were never about who wins, so much as who could

help keep the witty banter going or make fun of the characters and their moves the most. Lisa and Jessica both valued the performative nature of playing with other people. They could play *Rock Band* or *Brawl* alone, but then their purpose would be mostly focused on beating the game. The pleasure in playing these games instead came from interacting with other people and having an entertaining experience.

What is a *game*? Who is a *gamer*?

In doing this research, I was interested in whether or not my interviewees considered gaming as part of their identity and how that might affect how they played. In order to explore this, I asked the students who played games in 5N whether they considered themselves "gamers" or not, as well as what they considered to be a "game." Both the terms "gamer" and "game" have taken on specialized notions within digital gaming culture and they usually preclude non-digital gaming like table-top or card games. The boundaries of whom or what is labeled with each term are continually contested and redrawn.

Schott and Horrell, (2000) concluded their study on girls and women who play digital games by offering an alternative concept to the "masculinised heavy gamer:" the "girl gamer" (p. 50). But this new categorization resulted in the creation of a female stereotype that doesn't recognize the range of gaming styles and motivations that girls and women have. Their finding, such as: "girl gamers rejected games such as sports games and violent, combat focused games that are not open to creative interpretation," do more to compartmentalize the interests of female players, than show their diversity of interests (p. 50).

In the excerpts below from my interviews, the subjects use the term “game” as a synonym for “digital game.” The absence of talk about non-digital games was most likely because the interviews were initially framed to be about digital games. It had been made clear to the interviewee that I was primarily interested in digital gaming, so when I asked a question such as “What is or is not a game to you?” they answered in terms of digital games.

Some of the students in 5N related static impressions of what a game is, such as Mei who said that games had to require “some kind of skill.” This was in response to asking her about the popular Facebook game *Farmville*, which she did not consider a game. Games like *Farmville* and *The Sims,* both of which happen to be very popular with female players, are sometimes called *simulations* instead of games. They are open-ended and often mimic an aspect of real life. Jason recognized this as an area where what is and isn't a game started to blur:

> Jason: *Sims* I would consider a game; I don't play *Farmville* so I really don't know. There's that fine line, or blurry, between games and simulation...with digital games it's easy to make the distinction – if it's not a game, it's a movie.

Rachel's definition of a game is more dynamic. She states that her conception has changed over the years depending on her social context:

> Rachel: For video games, definitions have kind of changes throughout my life. In high school, a video game either meant an MMO or an FPS. People never thought of *DDR* or *Rock Band* as a video game so much. To play a video game was like *Smash*, *Counter Strike, WOW* guild wars... If you were to talk about *Pokemon* in my high school...they'd consider it a game, but not a “gamer” game. It's not a typical game that would be played by the gamer bunch.
> Interviewer: What made that distinction?
> Rachel: I don't think handheld games were big...It was a lot of console games and PC games. I don't know what it was about handheld games that didn't appeal to them...
> Interviewer: What about *Farmville* and the *Sims*?
> Rachel: I play *Cafe World* all the time on Facebook. Yeah it would be a game. Not quite in the social context of a gamer game, but I feel like the usual type of game for gamer

> community is console games or PC games. Whereas on the outskirts of that would be handheld games, online flash games.

Here Rachel explained what a game was in her social context of high school. She admitted to being a person who plays games mostly for social reasons, and we see in her answer that she was looking to how other people in her surroundings defined games to construct her own understanding of what did and did not fit in. Games for Rachel in high school meant, MMORPG's and FPS's that people played together. Other popular games that were not played with others were games, but not “gamer” games. She created the categories “gamer” games, “social” games, and “handheld” games to differentiate between the games she played and saw others play. The “gamer” games were the first category she drew out, and it was the most socially acceptable type of game to discuss and play with others at school. She also pointed out the importance of platform, which we see come up as well when people define gamer. Console games and PC games were related with being a gamer and playing more competitively. Contributing to this understanding could be that the most high profile gaming tournaments usually involve console gaming or a computer LAN party. Handheld games were not popular, although she is not sure why; but it is likely they were associated with younger or more feminine-gendered games.

Each person I interviewed had different criteria for what is a game and who is a gamer. For games, the criteria ranged, from whether or not there was a goal to what platform it was played on to whether it required strategy. A person's criteria for who is a gamer depended on the level of experience of the people who played games around them, what was being played, and the level of intensity of play.

The meanings of gamer to the interviewees were just as varied as they were for game but there was more at stake in the definition because they were also defining themselves. Fron et al. (2007) explore the implications of how "gamer" has come to be generally defined in digital gaming culture.

> The notion of the "gamer" which has defined the rhetoric of game marketing and fandom, has created a sub-culture which is exclusionary and alienating to many people who play games, but who do not want to be associated with the characteristics and game play styles commonly associated with "hardcore gamers." This stereotype may actually *prevent* some people from playing games entirely. (p. 310)

As I will show the "gamer" stereotype that Fron et al. discuss above is a guidepost for how most of the 5N students made sense of their own gaming identity. Another factor that made this stereotype even more exaggerated for these players in 5N was that the students were situated at MIT, where there is a heavy gaming and "geek" presence that can raise the bar of who self-identifies as a gamer. The students defined themselves relative to other people around them. For some students in this group at MIT, gamer stood for the most extreme players. It was a label reserved for only the most dedicated and skilled players of traditional "hardcore" digital games.

During an interview with Jessica and Mei, I uncovered a tension between them surrounding the negative connotation sometimes associated with the term gamer:

> Mei: I guess I play a lot more games than Jessica. I'm an avid gamer.
> Jessica: I don't consider myself a gamer.
> Interviewer: How do you two define "gamer"?
> Mei: I guess someone who plays every day? Now that I'm not at my parents' I play a game of *League of Legends* everyday.
> Jessica: I think it's for me, its people who feel like there's something missing if they

don't play a game. Kind of like addicts.
Mei: Hey!
Jessica: If we took away all your game supplies, would you feel lost?
Mei: Yes, I would in fact
Jessica: There you go. Without my stuff, I'd be ok.
Interviewer: So you think it becomes a part of your identity?
Jessica: I stopped playing *Conquer* once I got here because none of my friends -- I only went online because my friends were online and I would just play with them because I can't contact them through any other means. And then *Smash* is something I just do, "Oh hey we're all playing *Smash*, play *Smash"*...I don't feel like its part of who I am. They don't say, "Oh she plays *Smash* a lot," or "She goes online a lot." I just don't really think that it's that much a part of me if there was no Wii anymore. I'd feel sad cause I would miss playing but I wouldn't be like, "Oh I need to go get a Wii."

Mei's criterion is simple and one-faceted; frequency of play is most important to her when deciding who is a gamer. To Jessica, though, gaming for a gamer is more of a habit. Mei is immediately offended by Jessica's view. The two students have very different conceptions of the term gamer, which are influenced by their experiences with gaming and their motivations for playing. Jessica's identity is much less integrated with gaming. She frames gaming as an excuse to socialize, not as an activity that offers enough pleasure for her to participate in it if no one else is playing.

Surprisingly, Lisa probably played the most digital games of anyone I interviewed (three to four hours every day and more on the weekends), yet she distanced herself from the traditional gamer stereotype. She made a distinction between "hardcore" and "non-hardcore" gamers**.** Juul (2010) has recognized this growing dichotomy between stereotypes of "hardcore" and, what he calls, "casual" players:

> *Stereotype of a hardcore player*...has a preference for science fiction, zombies, and fantasy fictions, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games.

> *Stereotype of a casual player*...has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit little time and few resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games. (p. 8)

Juul has admitted these are stereotypes that do not fit the reality of most players, but they are representative of common conceptions of two very different types of player. In her interview, Lisa drew a similar distinction between her group of friends and "hardcore" gamers. However, she tied her descriptions more to the platform and the level of competition than the kinds of games or how much time was spent playing:

> Interviewer: Do you consider yourself a gamer? What kinds of terms do you use around gaming? Do you call your friends other things?
> Lisa: I definitely call us, all my friends, "gamers," but I would say that we're more leisure, soft core, artistic or fun, social gaming. I picture gaming like there's hardcore, which is mostly FPS they get into tournaments and competition online. Mostly like Xbox centered, I would see as like hardcore gaming. And softcore would be like Nintendo, the Wii, mostly like just fun games you play with your family and friends.
> Interviewer: So is that what you think is important? I've heard that before, that you're "softcore" you're a "causal," you're doing it for the fun and if you're "hardcore" you're doing it for something else, like work. Do you agree with that? Are "hardcore" gamers doing it for fun?
> Lisa: I think there's fun in it for them to, but I try to stick more to just plain fun and less competition fun.

Lisa accepted the label of gamer here for herself and her friends, but quickly specified a sub-category marked by mediating terms like "leisure," "softcore," "artistic," "fun," and "social." She added these modifiers before the term gamer to distinguish the qualities that made her different from a stereotypical "hardcore" gamer. She understood her way of gaming to be more about having fun than competing, which suggests that she saw a tension between competition and fun. Some people would say that more competition generates more fun, but Lisa stated that this was not true for her. At times, she fit the stereotype of hardcore gamer, but she resisted the label "gamer." While some people who play games want to dissociate themselves

from casual or social gaming, Lisa had the opposite reaction. She identified more with casual gaming because she does not want to identify with high levels of competition or gaming that is too serious.

When asked about gamers, Rachel's definition changed depending on her context. She was affiliated with a group of people she called “gamers” in high school but didn't feel like she was a part of the group. She did play games, some “gamer” games, but also other kinds of games. She called herself more of a “casual” or “social” gamer:

> Interviewer: Do you call yourself a gamer?
> Rachel: Never thought about this. My definition of a gamer has changed a lot throughout my life. In high school, gamers were the people who sat together and had LAN parties on the weekend and talked about *Counter Strik*e all the time and guild wars and stuff. There was a clearly defined gamer bunch at our school. I was not part of the gamer bunch. I was probably in the outskirts of the gamer bunch. I had connections to the gamer bunch through my AP computer science class, but even the people in my AP computer science class not all of them were in the gamer bunch. A lot of us were just friends with the people who were gamers...I feel like the people who are gamers are the ones who are really into it. That's like their main hobby. When a game comes out they'll be the first people to buy it...Whereas there's just casual gamers, like I'm kind of a casual gamer. Or a social gamer, like MMO's are more social gaming for me. I don't go on for leveling up and the sake of guild raids. I go on to hang out with my friends.

Rachel self-identified somewhere between gamers and non-gamers. She has played a variety of digital games, but it was not the only pastime she had. She mentioned that her purpose in gaming was not to “level up” but to socialize. She emphasized that gamers play games for the sake of winning or progressing in the game, which was not as important to her.

So how did the term “gamer” come to represent such a niche of gaming culture? If someone plays games often, but does it for a reason other than winning or competing, why are they

called a “gamer”? Should they want to be called one? There is tension around the term “gamer” because it is being used to represent too small of a portion of the gaming participants. It is as if the term “film-goer” was only used to represent teens that watch scary movies. There are specialized terms in film that describe slices of the film-going audience, for whom watching films is central to their identity; for example, “cineaste.” With gaming, however, there exists no such nuanced terminology for the growing number of identities associated with it. Also, the terms we do use uphold normative understandings of gender. So far, the industry and the people who game have been softening or sharpening the term “gamer” to fit their purposes. The future of the term is uncertain, and even if it disappears from the nomenclature of gaming culture, would its banishment eliminate the view that console gaming is a “boy's world”?

Jason and Pat, the two male members of the 5N community who I interviewed, both identified themselves as gamers, but they also had flexible understandings of what that meant. When I asked Pat how he defined a gamer, his answer was more open-ended than the “hardcore” and “casual” stereotypes offered above. He put the decision of whether or not someone is a gamer in the hands of the person being labeled in a way that is reflective of the inclusive culture of the lounge:

> Interviewer: Would you call the people on this floor gamers? What does that term mean to you?
> Pat: I don't think I would call anyone a gamer. That's a term that you can only decide if it applies to yourself or not. I know some people who play only things like Wii *Sports* and they consider themselves gamers because they get really into what they do. Or people who like casual play really hardcore games like *Halo* or *Gears of War*.
> Interviewer: So you think has to be a self-definition?
> Pat: Yeah I do. So say you only play one game but you're really into it, or you play a whole bunch of games barely scratching the surface. It's hard to say. Would I consider myself a gamer, yes. But I can't explain why. It's not like an objective; I've played this

percentage of the games that exist in the world for this amount of time.
Interviewer: So is it like when you embrace it?
Pat: Yeah it's an identity you have to embrace.

Pat seemed to recognize the role of social context and the multitude of criteria that are involved in making sense of what a gamer might be. Under his terms, the people playing games have the agency to claim that identity for themselves. This is not to ignore that many people, including the games industry, do not have the ability to name who is in the gamer club and who is out, but Pat gives us a glimpse here of a new approach to defining "gamer" that permits each person to decide for themselves if they will accept, reject, or negotiate the label. This approach is one possibility for negotiating the term, but for now "gamer" is likely not a helpful term for describing most people who play digital games.

Conclusion

This chapter explains the individual experiences, motivations, and preferences of some members of the 5N play community. There are many other students who participate in activities in the lounge or pass through now and again. Their stories are likely to overlap at points with those presented here, but more likely they would vary based on their own gaming histories (or lack there of), playing styles, and social contexts.

Understanding players at the individual level is important in order to show that their relationships to games are not static, but instead are constantly changing along with their current social context. As I showed, out of the current women who play digital games in the 5N lounge, most of them played digital games growing up and they played alongside males. There

were not many female gaming mentors for them while growing up. This meant that students like Lisa, Mei, and Rachel had to negotiate how to participate in male-majority contexts. Now, while attending a prestigious university that focuses on science and technology and has a long tradition of supporting a geek culture, it is possible that they will draw on their abilities to interact in traditionally male-dominated fields. There will also be new roles for these students as mentors to other women who they introduce to digital game play. This informal mentoring system is already occurring, as I showed in Chapter One and it will be interesting to observe whether there is a shift in who introduces the next generation of girls to digital gaming.

Working off of Brown & Vaughan's modes of play, I was able to map the variety of motivations for play and game preferences exhibited by the students in the 5N community. These are not gender specific, but instead are related to what access the students have to games, their experiences gaming in different contexts, and what kinds of play they get pleasure from. Socializing was the most prevalent motivation for both the female and male students, which is not typically a quality associated with digital game play. The individual motivations to socialize while gaming helped make the 5N community what it was, and they also allowed room for other interests and social motivations of other non-gaming students. These students played digital games that required other contexts or access to equipment like *Rock Band* or MMORPG's like *World of Warcraft,* but they were also interested in the kind of co-located, multiplayer, low-stakes social gaming that went on the 5N lounge as a way of interacting with their friends and being exposed to other activities like doing homework, eating, or watching movies.

In the same way that gaming preferences and motivations among the students vary depending on context, so did their understanding of the terms “game” and “gamer.” While the sample size was too small to draw general conclusions, it was interesting that the two male players did not hesitate to call themselves “gamers,” but most of the women resisted that term or modified it with words like “social” or “casual.” “Gamer” has come to be a term that is tied to a stereotype that does not (or never did) effectively describe the range of people who play digital games. Because of this, women, and presumably men, who do not want to identify with the “hardcore” stereotype feel the need to negotiate the meaning of the term and change it to fit their own gaming styles. “Gamer” also fails to include many people, like Janelle, who play only non-digital games. The more narrowly people define these terms the more they can be leveraged to exclude players from gaming culture. For this paper, finding the essence or nature of each of the words is not relevant (or possible). Instead, the focus has been on understanding how people socially construct the meanings of each term, what factors affect those meaning, and how those meanings can affect the participation of others.

CONCLUSION

Groups of players like the 5N community have yet to be researched extensively. They are young adults, who gather together in a common space with a shared interest to socialize with one another and play games. It is likely that there are similar groups who play games together in other college dorms or in their homes, but researchers do not focus on them often. In many ways, the 5N community is a positive model for what mainstream gaming culture may look like within the next ten years, with more equal numbers of men and women, people of color, and participants with diverse interests and motivations for playing. I located several aspects that were key to attracting a diverse range of participants and maintaining an inclusive community.

Focus on play rather than games

Using working definitions from Salen and Zimmerman (2004), I emphasized the distinction between games as having quantifiable goals and play as being more open-ended to show that the 5N community valued the play process over the results of who won or lost games. The students played games that for the most part were not collaborative and that had quantifiable goals. Formal goals were important in helping shape the play process and in motivating each students' actions during the game; most students enjoyed winning. However, whether or not someone won the game did not affect how he or she was accepted in the community. Instead, how the students interacted during the game – with humor, kindness, and sociability –

determined the valued members of the community.

The 5N community's focus on the play process helped make their game play more inclusive. Students who lacked experience or skill were not kept from participating. Several of the women in the community were fortunate to have long histories of playing digital games, access to consoles, and networks of other experienced friends to help them build up skill levels. This added to their abilities to participate in the gaming on their floor. However, there were female and male students who did not have this background and were still able to participate in one form of gaming or another. The shared goal of all the players, which was to take part in a playful social activity, influenced the standards they used to accept new players. The social barriers to entry and the interpersonal stakes were almost always low.

The games that were played by the students were usually easy to learn, and if they were not, as was the case with *Tractor*, there were other students who were willing to mentor new players. Even if someone attempted to play the game after learning the basic rules and did not play well – as was the case for me – that player was not seen as without value to the game. Newcomers could participate in the socializing around the game – whether it was the witty banter, telling stories and jokes, or singing songs. Even students who did not have any interest in playing digital games could feel a connection to players by engaging in the socializing around the game.

As a researcher, choosing to frame the students of 5N as a *play community* instead of a *game community*, allowed me to show how gaming was part of a network of social activities that took

place in the lounge. When groups play digital or non-digital games together, we can be quick to define them by their interest in gaming alone. As we saw in Chapter Three, most of the female students chose not to identify as “gamers.” They negotiated how they positioned themselves with digital gaming culture. Digital gaming is becoming more ubiquitous and fitting into people's lives in new and diverse ways. As researchers we have to recognize that gaming can be just one of many activities in which people participate.

Games studies is a maturing field. Games researchers should consider the affordances of broadening their scope of research to include more of the process of play and its context. Games as formal systems are, of course, a key part of research in the field. A wider scope of research that includes more open-ended play will help us form a more complete picture of how gaming fits into people's lives, the many purposes it serves, and diverse pleasures it offers.

The term “gamer” is not helpful

The stereotypical understanding of “gamer” too often makes associations only with players who follow the “hardcore ethic” and make digital gaming central to how they define themselves. The term “gamer” does not adequately represent the majority of people who play digital games. It also rarely is used to refer to people who play non-digital games, which can limit our understanding of how digital and non-digital gaming practices overlap and intersect. In research, we should recognize the weight that has been given to the term “gamer” and use it carefully. It is also not sufficient to rely on modifiers like “casual” or “girl” to stretch the way the term can be used. These modifiers maintain a default understanding of “gamer” as “hardcore,” “male,” and often “white.”

I refrained from using the term “gamer” to describe anyone in this thesis, unless they chose the term. Instead, I referred to my subjects as “students” and “players” -- terms that carry fewer normative assumptions about gender, age, race, ethnicity, or identifications with certain modes of play.

I am not suggesting then that we change the meaning of the term “gamer,” but rather that we look for new and more open ways to describe people who find pleasure in playing games, digital and non-digital. By using the word “player” when referring to someone involved in a game, the implicit emphasis would shift from the formal object (game-r) to the action of the participant (play-er). For now, the usage of the term “gamer” narrows our understanding of who plays games and how they play at the very moment when gaming is spreading to newer and more diverse audiences and venues, including, classrooms, retirement homes, and cell phones. We should be eager to include more players in gaming.

Digital games can facilitate socializing

It is worth belaboring common sense knowledge that digital games can facilitate social interaction. As I showed with the 5N community, facilitating playful socializing was the main purpose for playing digital and non-digital games in the lounge. Games can still be solitary activities; students from the community played digital games alone at times. Yet there is nothing inherent to digital games that makes them socially isolating. Non-digital games have long been understood as social tools for bringing people together – whether it is at the local bridge club, on the hopscotch court at recess time, or at a large arena for a sporting event.

Digital games in the 1980's and 1990's tended to be single-player or designed for head-to-head competition between players. However, games now are becoming networked online or designed to include collaborative modes where large numbers of people play together towards the same goals. We are still trying to break from the molds of earlier digital game design and stereotypical constructions of who plays and how they play. Research about online gaming often recognizes the social aspect; perhaps that is because communication is usually recorded on chat screens or message boards and can be better documented than the conversations that occur during offline game play. I have attempted to capture some of the ephemeral bits of conversation that occurred during gaming in the 5N lounge, but there is a need for more documentation and research that explores social aspects of digital games that are played in other co-located, offline contexts. We can then learn more about how these different social contexts influence who participates in playing and who is left out.

There is no typical female player

The female players of 5N played a few of the same games, but they each played other games with different groups of people or on their own. They played games from different genres and on different platforms. This finding fits with a growing number of studies on gender and game play that "have moved on from simple binaries" of what "a girl might 'like' or 'dislike'" to understand that "how [girls] play is always negotiable, context dependent, and usually not necessarily in the company of other girls or female players" (Jenson & de Castell, 2010, p. 56). Female players engage in a variety of play styles, have a range of motivations for playing, and enjoy playing a range of games.

Some game designers would surely like to find the element that would make all female players love to play their games, but this is impossible to do for any broad category of player. Women's interests in gaming are influenced by innumerable factors including age, previous exposure to games, other available players, race, and class. The quest for making the ultimate “girl game” will not succeed; fortunately, it can be abandoned for the more helpful project of designing games that appeal to diverse groups of players and are flexible to their ever-changing motivations and playing styles.

The role of female mentors

All of the female players in 5N were introduced to playing digital games by male players. In addition, most of these women went on to play games in groups that were made up mostly of male players. In some ways, these interactions may have benefited the women as they learned how to negotiate social interactions with groups of their male peers. Now that the women are at MIT they are likely to find themselves the only woman in some classes or labs. Perhaps they will draw on this familiarity with negotiating male-dominated contexts as a skill to better position themselves for success.

Women play a new and growing role in digital gaming culture. The women who play in the 5N lounge have the potential to introduce new girls and women to the pleasures of playing games. This generation of young female players will be the first sizeable group that has had the opportunity to play digital games for almost their entire lives. It is yet to be seen how the next generation of girls will be affected by their mentoring relationships with older female players.

Mentoring might make girls more likely to identify with gaming culture, or change popular conceptions about who plays. It is possible that girls will be exposed to different kinds of games than they would if they were playing with boys. Would Rachel or Lisa have played the same games growing up if they had had female mentors? The point would not be to move towards a segregated model where women introduce girls and men introduce boys to gaming. Instead, female and male players should be introducing both girls and boys to digital games. For a child to have both a mother and a father as gaming mentor might show her or him different approaches to playing a game or playing with others. Having more female mentors will at the very least open up the possibilities of what gaming culture can be and offer more options for new players.

Further research

My access to conduct participant observations and interviews with members of the 5N community was invaluable to understanding what factors influence the inclusiveness of a community that plays digital games together. Given more time and access though, I would have liked to have incorporated other dimensions to my research. First, I was not able to set up interviews with every member of the community. While this may not have been necessary, I would have especially like to talked to more of the male students, as well as more students who did not participate in gaming activities. By talking two these sub-groups of the community I could learn more about how their experiences differed or overlapped with those of the female players.

Second, I would like to have made my study more comparative with other groups who played

digital games together. In the same dorm as the 5N lounge there were at least two other halls that had groups of students who played games together. Both groups were made up of mostly male students. One group played more first-person-shooter games on Xbox or PS3's in their individual rooms. The other group played *Brawl* and *Melee*, as well as some Wii-based RPG's. I talked with Mei and Jessica briefly in their interview about the latter group and inquired why, even though they were friends with those players, they did not play *Brawl* with them. Jessica responded: “I can go hang out, but I don't quite-- I don't fit in. I feel very female.” I had hoped to have time to spend in this other space with some of the female players from 5N to figure out what made them feel different, but unfortunately I was not able to. This kind of comparative study with other groups at MIT, or other groups at a different college could yield very interesting evidence of how social context influences players of digital games.

Further research could fill many of the gaps that remain in understanding the advantages of creating spaces focused on play as opposed to gaming, including how it might enable more people to participate, especially those people who feel like they can not or should not participate. The students in the 5N lounge were generous with their time and their honesty about how they created and sustained their community. They are not meant to be portrayed here as an utopia, but instead as an example of an alternative to the more stereotypical gaming cultures we often see in movies, gaming magazines, and even in games research. My purpose in analyzing this community's social context, game preferences, playing styles, and personal experiences is to add to the body of evidence that shows digital gaming culture is in transition, evolving and diversifying. It is up to us as researchers to keep up with its pace, if not push it even further towards greater inclusiveness.

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