VIRTUAL OR REALITY? ELEMENTS OF MASCULINITIES ACROSS VIDEO GAME PLAY CONTEXTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The role of “gendered play” in the construction of masculine or feminine identities has often been discussed (Goffman 1977; Thorne 1993). Though play is sometimes regarded as mere children’s behavior, such works illustrate the many ways in which individuals of all ages use gendered fantasy play to test gender boundaries while forging new identities. In general, distinctions between masculinities and femininities are reinforced through a process of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987). For instance, primary school-aged boys have been noted to use “bricolage” and other strategies to participate in the construction of masculinities (Jordan and Cowan 1995; Thorne 1993). Similarly, adult males who engage in locker room talk or office “girl watching” reinforce particular aspects of masculinity (Curry 1991; Quinn 2002). Gender takes sui generis form as these behaviors guide formation of identities with similar characteristics. Then, as gendered identities subsequently guide even more subtle behaviors of everyday life, men and women appear very different, even at young ages or in apparently trivial behaviors.

The popular culture phenomenon of video gaming provides a burgeoning context for such gendered play, and subsequently, the construction of masculinities. Like prior technologies and entertainment media, video games have been heavily sex-typed. Initially, the games targeted boys and men by appealing to traditional
masculine ideals of technical mastery. Since computers were part of the masculine
domain, early computer games were largely developed with male preferences in
mind (Cassell and Jenkins 1998). However, games have more recently moved into
the mainstream, away from the computer or video arcade and into the living room.
No longer relegated to niche status, video gaming generated about $10 billion in
the United States in 2005 (Chaplin and Ruby 2005). Although the larger audience
has led to greater diversity in types of game software available, and though female
participation is increasing, by far the heaviest consumers of this new medium are
males (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; van Schie and Wiegman 1997).

Just as easily as children once identified the target audience of Barbie and GI-
Joe, children as young as nine years old now learn to recognize differences in “boy”
and “girl” video games (Kafai 1998; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 1998; Wilder
et al. 1985). Male players tend to prefer the violent action-packed adventure or
role-playing games, which are said to alienate female gamers (Cassell and Jenkins
1998). Additionally, as the boys that grew up playing video games in the 1970s
and 1980s have matured, the content has been adapted to the preferences of its
aging audience, targeting these men with more mature subject matter. Video
games are certainly no longer merely a child’s toy; the industry now caters to
adults as well as children.

In addition to the broadening age demographic, the social aspects of gaming
are also changing, even as video arcades and other public gaming spaces are on the
decline (Williams 2006). It is widely believed that gaming is primarily solitary.
However, technological changes have in some ways increased player interactions.
For instance, face-to-face multiplayer gaming tournaments are fairly common in
homes, college campuses, and cyber cafes, among other locales. Many games, like
the best-selling *Madden Football* series, provide an indoor alternative to athletic competition. Additionally, competitive action games like *Halo* allow gamers to fight for superiority in a “deathmatch.” Recently, such gaming has even become a televised sport-like competition, complete with cash prizes and endorsement deals for the victors. And just like the real-world sporting arena or colosseum, the playing field is largely exclusive to males. This ultimately contributes to a homosocial “locker-room” environment in which idealized masculinities can be constructed. For instance, prior research on sport and gender has shown that both on-field as well as locker-room behaviors often reinforce hegemonic notions of masculinity at the expense of women and certain groups of men (Quinn 2002).

Unlike the real-world sporting field, which is always face-to-face, gaming can also sometimes take place on a virtual playing surface. Players may cooperate or compete with other avatars, or in-game characters controlled by anonymous real-world others. Some services, like Microsoft’s *Xbox Live*, provide networking features and voice communication for these players, effectively bridging the real-world identity with the virtual persona. Others, like massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), utilize the Internet’s social networking potential to create robust online communities complete with emergent norms, economies, and mythologies (Castronova 2005). Such online services provide access to an endless supply of thousands of eager companions or competitors at a moment’s notice. Not surprisingly, the dramatically different environment changes its potential for gendered play. For instance, under the anonymity of a virtual self, one might choose to “do” a different gender. Indeed, some studies have shown that such gender-bending is somewhat common in the world of the MMORPG (Yee 2006).
Because of such differences between real-world sports and the video gaming environment, it remains to be seen, however, whether video gaming can be examined as a sort of “surrogate sport” in which the norms of hegemonic masculinity are promoted and reinforced. Hence, the overall goal of this project is to examine the “gendering potential” of video gaming across the contexts within which play takes place. Specifically, this piece analyzes three such gaming environments: offline single-player, offline multi-player, and online multi-player. In doing so, the study shall identify differences in the building blocks of gender identities across the gaming contexts. While a small pool of research has noted elements of games from which masculinities can be constructed (see, e.g., [Dietz 1998] [Jenkins 1998] [Kinder 1991]), at present no study addresses the gendering dynamics within the phenomenon of video gaming as a whole. For instance, though many games have patriarchal and violent themes (Dietz 1998), previous research does not address the context-specific dynamics that may lead one to be more heavily exposed to such content. In other words, by focusing more heavily on the content, or the virtual world within the games, prior research has largely neglected connections to the gendering dynamics of the external world—that is, the three primary contexts in which gaming can occur. This project thus seeks to answer two specific questions: first, how do the elements of masculinities differ between single-player, non-social gaming, and multi-player, or social gaming contexts, either online or offline? Second, within the social, multi-player contexts, do the elements of masculinity construction depend on whether the interactions are primarily offline, in the real world, or online, in a virtual environment?

To more thoroughly explore these contextual nuances in gender identity construction, a more sophisticated theoretical framework has been employed. The
analyses utilize Messner’s (2002) conceptualization of gender identities as a set of mutually-interacting structural, cultural, and performance factors. In the following section, this framework is discussed in greater detail. The framework is applied to the existing body of video game research to demonstrate its utility in understanding the gendering dynamics of gaming. The tripartite model is then used to understand survey data collected in a large-scale study of video gamers. In doing so, the specific intent of this piece is to present a multifaceted depiction of how elements of masculinity construction differ among the three social contexts of video gaming. It should be noted that this piece does not specifically address the particular masculinities that may result from such elements. However, in understanding the building blocks of their construction, it hopes to create a general model of gamer masculinities upon which future work can be built.
CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 A Tri-Level Conceptualization of Gender

As stated previously, gender has often been conceptualized as a performance of an idealized role. Gendered play, thus, is an obvious outlet for such performances. However, the particular performances involved with gendered play do not occur in isolation from overarching norms, status structures, and cultural ideals. These factors also shape the performance, contributing to its efficacy at communicating gender. In this light, we might imagine that actors don a masculine or feminine “costume.” The actors then appear before an audience and utilize symbolic “props” to perform the masculine or feminine role. This revised metaphor for the construction of gender illustrates what Messner (2002) terms the tri-level conceptualization.

According to this model, women and men seem to be vastly different not only because of gender-typed performances, but also because of systematic variation in social position, or structures, and the use of gendered cultural symbols. In short, the ability of actors to actually perform a gender identity is constrained or enabled by a structural context and allusions to cultural symbols; conversely, gendered performances, and therefore gendered play, shape both culture and structure. Therefore, in order to fully understand gendered play one needs to study not only
individual behaviors but also the structural and cultural context within which they take place.

While the study of culture, structure, and performance is certainly not unique to Messner’s work, the tri-level conceptual framework makes explicit the need to examine these components as an integrated whole. The three levels of analysis are artificially separated heuristics. However, taken together they represent a single, multifaceted process of identity construction. Interaction, structure, and culture are mutually intertwined factors contributing to the appearance of significant and inherent differences between the biological sexes of male and female. Therefore, the connections among structure, culture, and performance must be considered in addition to each component’s impact in isolation. Messner argues that without simultaneously examining the construction of gender under each of these conceptual lenses, conclusions drawn from observations of the gendering dynamic will be distorted or incomplete (2002).

This conceptualization of gender results in a nuanced portrayal of the gendering dynamics within a particular milieu. For instance, Messner applies the tri-level framework to vividly illustrate the gender dichotomy of a youth soccer league (2000; 2002). In doing so, he reveals an intricate arrangement among the actors. As Messner notes:

The resulting binary split between the sexes occurred in the context of a situation systematically structured by sex segregation, sparked by the imposing presence of a shared cultural symbol that is saturated with gendered meanings and actively supported and applauded by adults who basked in the pleasure of difference reaffirmed (2002, p. 23).

Instead of appearing as a complex and impenetrable process, the gendering dynamic is deconstructed here as a collection of multilevel dynamics that shape the
ostensibly innate differences in masculine and feminine interests and behaviors. While the resulting portrayal does not describe the particular identities that may arise from the milieu, by examining gender at the three conceptual levels, a more thorough understanding of the potential identities can be obtained.

2.2 Elements of Video Gaming Masculinities

Using the tri-level conceptual framework, the interacting components of the gender dynamics of gaming can be distilled into simpler components. The homosocial environment provides a structural stage for interpreting the symbolic meaning of the in-game narrative. Furthermore, the characters and environments embedded within the game by the likely male programmers creates a gendered role for the gamer to perform. The interaction among these components leads to an emergent meaning, negotiated by those involved in the crowd playing or observing the game, those who produce the game, and those virtual citizens—the villains, heroes, and so on—who inhabit the game’s false reality. Because the meaning of these interacting components is continually under negotiation, even those males who put on the costume of “warrior drag” to perform the counter-stereotypical role of the “sexy heroine” may yet be perpetuating traditional or hegemonic masculine ideals (Berger 2002; Kinder 1991).

Many of these components have been examined independently in previous sociological and psychological research on gender and video gaming. Dietz (1998) and Berger (2002) argue in the tradition of symbolic interactionism that the symbolic gender content of video games is incorporated into gamer masculinities. Hence, since video games are, many times, brutally violent, patriarchal, and sexual, the resulting masculinities are implicitly expected to carry these features. Indeed, the
violent computer game *Doom* was blamed by some for the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999, as the killers allegedly used it to fantasize about their attack (Brown 1999). Jenkins (1998), on the other hand, argues that video games provide a “gendered play space” in which males may express, or perform, preexisting aspects of their masculinity. While each of these elements provides some insight into the masculinities that arise out of gaming, taken separately, and apart from the influence of social structure, they do not paint a complete picture of gamer masculinities.

### 2.2.1 Structures of Video Gaming

The gender-segregated nature of video gaming is one primary social structure that contributes to the gendering dynamics of the phenomenon as a whole. Not only is the activity, in general, largely dominated by males according to some studies (Kafai 1998; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 1998; Wilder et al. 1985), but it is also segregated in terms of preferences male and female gamers hold for particular genres. Because the groups are separated, and hence artificially polarized, small differences between males and females—or males and other males—are magnified and exaggerated. The two groups appear different because they are constrained by the structures of a different context. It is this that often makes it difficult to see masculinities as social constructions rather than inherent biological differences (Messner 2002). Additionally, in a single-sex community, there exist few opportunities for norms and stereotypes to be broken. Thus, for the males within the gaming community, the homosocial environment provides few opportunities to undermine the notion of masculinity.

However, many other factors likely lead up to this eventual segregation, since
the phenomenon of gaming does not occur in isolation from other overarching gender structures. A number of behavioral patterns recur as social structures guide people toward gender appropriate action; the structures basically filter the biological sexes toward ideal male or female behavior. For instance, access to video games might be shaped by the perception that males are naturally more technologically inclined, or that technology is more appropriate for males. This perception is extremely pervasive among all ages and both sexes. For instance, in surveys of children as young as kindergarten, both boys and girls see video games as more appropriate for boys (Kafai 1998; Kinder 1991; Wilder et al. 1985). This stereotype likely impacts parents’ decisions to purchase games as well as the decision making processes of children and adults through peer pressure.

Family structures may also provide initial pathways into video gaming. First, many gamers seem to begin at a young age, typically between seven and 12 years old (Kinder 1991). Because of this, the family is likely to be the primary vector for introducing gamers to the activity. Additionally, as family structure has changed over time, video games have become a surrogate parent or a way to bring the family together (Kinder 1991; Mitchell 1985). Historically, video games have been marketed as such, though the increasing age of gamers has somewhat dampened this trend.

For boys in particular, the games sometimes provide a replacement for an absent male or father figure. For instance, boys can compete in a virtual baseball game, if they have no one to play catch with. Similarly, they may connect with dad and other males by fighting for victory on a virtual battle or football field. Video games often carry such an “oedipal” dimension, in which a young boy matures to fill the role of the father figure (Kinder 1991). These themes may
facilitate connections among males, as they connect via shared interest in the content. Such interactions between culture and structure are likely to create a strong pathway for males to be introduced to video gaming through parents or other males, and ultimately contribute to a primarily homosocial environment.

Once within the gaming community, patterns of interactions with other gamers may further maintain and reinforce boundaries between gamers and non-gamers. The ritual, for some, is a focal point around which men may bond, both within and outside the games’ virtual environment. Furthermore, since the gamer is doing this within a real-world social setting that is already gendered, the identity constructing effects are magnified. Certain types of games, particularly those that offer multiplayer options, seem likely to become “locker-room” type environments, as they isolate males from identities that may contradict or undermine their notion of masculinity. Thus, the fact that a group of mostly-male gamers shares an experience set apart from females and non-gamers makes the games a potentially potent socializing force. The meaning of this experience is under constant negotiation by those involved. The group uses the games’ symbolic resources, as discussed in the following section, to construct a notion of gender.

2.2.2 Video Game Culture

The symbolic resources embedded within video games often carry gendered meanings that can be utilized in the construction of gender identities. Just as \textit{Barbie} and \textit{GI-JOE} represent particular femininities and masculinities, the content of games often evokes a gender ideal. These symbols can be incorporated into gamer masculinities. Alternatively, they may serve as focal points around which men may gather and generate new identities. Each game imprints on its players
a particular version of reality, imputed in the virtual world by artists, writers, and programmers. For instance, while playing the role of the “hero”—a knight in shining armor, or some similar role—gamers not only gain practice at performing an idealized conception of masculinity, but also discover subtle, or sometimes not-so-subtle cultural cues that indicate gender in other settings.

Jenkins (1998) argues that video games often appeal to a “boy culture” existent since the separation of male and female work spheres during the industrial revolution. Video games appeal to traditional “boy culture” as they provide play spaces to develop autonomy, allow feats of daring, promote mastery and self-control, construct male status hierarchies, present brutal violence and scatological imagery, develop imagination through role-playing, and foster bonding among men (Jenkins 1998, p. 270-274). Many games purposefully target these ideological aspects of masculine “boy culture.”

Dietz (1998) analyzed the content of then-popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis games and found that other traditional symbolic gender markers were present in many games of the time. Violence and aggression were central in nearly 80 percent of the games. Furthermore, males were portrayed more often as protagonist than were females. Sometimes, female characters were depicted as needing of rescue (e.g., the “damsel in distress”), but more frequently, women simply were absent altogether or insignificant to the plot of the game. Furthermore, Dietz finds that the games present stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. For instance, the characters’ styles of dress were often stereotypically male or female. Although this study is dated in the rapidly changing realm of video games, its conclusions are still largely valid. However, more recent games like the 1996 hit Tomb Raider depict females in more prominent roles.
Yet even as female characters star in lead roles, they tend to do so in a way that appeals to traditionally masculine cultural ideals. For instance, in the *Metroid* series of games, players control a heroic space ranger throughout a science-fiction style quest to eliminate the evil “Mother Brain.” Upon completion of this adventure, the lead character removes its helmet and gamers are surprised as they discover that the character is actually a woman (Berger 2002; Kinder 1991). These feelings of surprise are elicited as the traditionally male “hero” role is revealed to be filled by a female. Hence, rather than presenting a female lead as inherently feminine, games like this and *Tomb Raider* depict women in a sort of “warrior drag,” in which the character is “positioned to reject the monstrous maternal and to model themselves after the father” (Kinder 1991, p. 107). In short, women—and, by extension, men—are depicted as needing to become more masculine in order to fill the role of hero.

Of course, just like film and television, the content of video games varies greatly from game to game. Many of the above themes are not generalizable to the media as a whole. However, there are several ways to gauge the content of video games by proxy. First, in many countries video games are labeled a content rating system, similar to that of the television and movie industries. This provides an estimate of the appropriate age for the content, and by extension, the nature of the symbols within the game. In the United States, the system rates games as “E: for everybody of all ages,” “T: for teenagers,” or “M: for mature audiences.” Games targeted toward older players tend to have more incidences of violent and sexual imagery, as well as more adult-oriented subject matter and language. A second way to examine game content is through a widely-accepted typology, which is used in many gaming publications for reviewing and categorizing the games. While
sub-categories and genre-bending games sometimes blur the boundaries between games, there is a fairly well-established set of genres. The categories are as follows: driving or racing, sports, action or adventure, platformers, role-playing or RPGs, first-person shooters, strategy, fighting, and card, board, or puzzle.

2.2.3 Gendered Gaming Performances

The third component of the tripartite framework, performance, is intended to capture the ways individuals act and interact during the process of “doing gender.” Video games provide an interesting platform for such a performance, since gaming takes place simultaneously within both a virtual, in-game realm as well as an outside, real world. Virtual performances of gender are particularly fascinating because a player can be both actor and audience; the player takes control of an avatar—a virtual embodiment the player controls—and performs an identity that is shaped by real world and virtual constraints. The performance, then, is likely to be shaped not only by the relationship between the gamer and his peer audience, but also by the interaction between the gamer and his virtual self.

In some cases, gamers may use virtual performances to explore alternative notions of gender identity, or reinforce prevailing notions. For instance, when games provide female characters, male players may “possess” a woman to control her and explore a virtual transgender, that is, to perform gender as a female. The game *Tomb Raider*, mentioned previously, is an example of such play. Advertisements and reviews of the game touted the ability to control the game’s sexy lead character, Lara Croft. As Berger (2002) describes:

> It is leading buxom Lara around that seems to be one of the main attractions of the game—if not the main attraction, for many players.
In some respects Lara resembles an animated version of the Barbie Doll, which also has exaggerated breasts. And Lara can be thought of as a disguised and animated Barbie Doll that males can play with and lust after—though they will probably not recognize that Lara is a disguised version of a Barbie Doll (p. 88).

Though *Tomb Raider* and its numerous sequels are probably the most oft-cited games allowing this type of play, female lead characters are prominent in many games, often with “sexy” roles.

Many competitive multiplayer games, which often have a wider selection of characters, pit women against each other in competitive sports or fights. For instance, popular wrestling games like *WWE Day of Reckoning* include a “bra and panties match” in which players control women who wrestle in an effort to strip the other to her undergarments. Another game, *DOA Xtreme Beach Volleyball*, stars bikini-clad teams of women who play volleyball matches to win money that the players can use to purchase even more revealing outfits for the characters. Even as gamers embody these women, and perform an interpretation of female sexuality, they perform a real-world masculinity through interactions among gamers. In essence, this is a form of “girl-watching” (Quinn 2002). Gamers use literally and figuratively objectified representations of females for sexual gratification. It is important to note, however, that this analysis of these roles does not imply that gamers actually fill them or interpret them in this way. However, the presence of such roles provides a readily-available virtual costume that closely mirrors real-world identities.

Masculinities can also be performed in-game more generally in a variety of ways. Some games may allow men to perform traditional or hegemonic masculine roles by providing characters with exaggerated strength, bravery, masculinity, attractiveness, and intelligence. By filling the shoes of the gladiator, hero, or sports
champion, gamers perform an idealized gender role. These roles shape real-world identities and performances by providing an avenue for males to publicly and privately develop personalized conceptions of masculinity.

2.3 Adapting the Tripartite Framework

It should be noted that the operationalization of the tripartite framework this project employs differs significantly from that with which the model was introduced. Messner analyzed qualitative ethnographic data at the situational level, while this study utilizes a large-scale survey data (see section 3.1 below), which is primarily quantitative and measured at the individual level. The distinction, although subtle, has important implications for the generalizability of the study’s findings—a difference most simply conceived as a balance between situational validity and breadth. While Messner deconstructs one context’s emergent gendering dynamics, the present study attempts to extrapulate and reconstruct general notions of such dynamics by looking at the elements of gender identities within a broader context.

Messner’s (2000) analysis of gendering dynamics within a youth soccer league vividly illustrates this distinction. In Messner’s piece, the tri-level framework is used in hindsight to understand and give meaning to observations. Specific gendered identities, such as the girls’ “Barbie Dolls” team and the boys’ “Sea Monsters” can be understood in light of the tripartite model. Messner’s article thus deconstructs a situation’s emergent gendering dynamics in terms of mutually-interacting factors. In the present study, however, the three components are used to guide data collection and thus reconstruct a general notion of the implicit gender dynamics that might arise within the broad phenomenon of video gaming.
In short, by examining the structural, cultural, and performance variation across the single player, offline multiplayer, and online multiplayer contexts, new insights into the gendering processes associated with video gaming can be discovered.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

As stated previously, the purpose of this study is to examine variation in the three components of masculinities—structure, culture, and performance—across the three video gaming contexts—solo, multi-offline, and multi-online. Toward this end, a large-scale, purposeful sample of video gamers was obtained. Participants completed a short, web-based survey structured around the three components of the tri-level conceptual framework. Most questions were closed-ended, though several called for open-ended responses.

Anonymous adult volunteers, ages 18 and above, were recruited from a solicitation posted on joystiq.com, a popular video game news website. Joystiq is a video game web log (or “blog”), which posts short news articles about the gaming community. Upon contacting the site, its editors agreed to publish a short article about this study, as well as a hyperlink to the survey. The specific substantive intent of the survey remained undisclosed. The description stated only that the project is interested in examining the impact of games on identities and that input will help shape future research on video gaming. In order to limit response bias, females were not excluded from participating in the survey. No incentive for participation was offered.
The solicitation remained on the Joystiq front page from April 3 to April 4, 2006, though the study was publicized further as referral links propagated throughout the Web. This led to an initial rush of traffic for the first two days, after which the rate of participation slowed to fewer than ten responses per day. The survey remained open for the entirety of April, during which 2,905 responses were collected. After removing 333 minors and 70 obviously errant, blank, or duplicate submissions, 2,502 responses remained.

Due to sampling bias associated with non-random, purposeful recruitment, these data may not be reflective of the entire video game playing population. In general, the ideal sampling frame would be the entire population of gamers. This study, however, examines only the adult population of gamers that visited a particular game-related website and agreed to participate in the study. While the selection of adult gamers is intentional, the other sources of bias are difficult to assess. Researchers using similar recruitment methods (see, e.g., [Williams and Skoric 2005; Yee 2006]) suggest that the approach attracts a fairly representative sample of gamers. In this study, such a claim is substantiated by Joystiq’s large audience, and broad, general nature of its content; the site does not focus on a specific gaming platform or genre.

Still, it is likely that casual gamers are underrepresented in the sample since such individuals are less integrated into the gaming community. Conversely, avid gamers may be over-represented. Such people are likely to participate more heavily in online communities to find reviews or strategies for games, find new opponents, or simply communicate with other like-minded gamers. A slight bias toward heavy gamers is not necessarily problematic, however, as these gamers might be more apt to reveal nuances in the gender cues of gaming. Moreover, the size of the sample
may still lead to significant insights, even if the findings do not fully generalize to the entire game-playing population.

As with most survey research, a low completion rate was a concern. Of the 2,408 valid responses, 1,738 (72.2%) completed the full instrument. Fortunately, most drops occurred late in the survey, generally near the demographic section. Thus, while the majority of data was obtained successfully, gender data is unavailable for about one fourth of all participants. Available data show that the sample was overwhelmingly, and not surprisingly male: 1,744 of the 1,838 complete responses (94.9%) reported a male gender identity. While the 94 known females were dropped from further analyses, cases missing on gender were left in the set. To confirm that this did not skew the results, known males were compared to cases with unknown gender on key variables. In these comparisons, the differences were insignificant. The resulting dataset contained 2,408 cases, of which 1,744 (72.4%) are known males.

3.2 Survey and Data Construction

The 46-question instrument (see Appendix A) was structured around the three components of Messner’s (2002) tri-level framework. Most participants spent between 20 and 30 minutes completing the survey. Questions and answer choices were guided by the findings of previous research in addition to the input of gamers during a pre-testing phase. Throughout the survey, nearly all questions were closed-ended, though open-ended responses were permitted when answer choices were non-exhaustive. Additional open-ended questions were occasionally used to solicit more in-depth responses.

Structural measures were based upon the findings of previous exploratory re-
search. A component on initial pathways into video gaming was designed to learn more about structural barriers inhibiting or facilitating access to video gaming. The variables of interest here include indicators for having started gaming earlier than age 10 and for being introduced to the activity through parents, siblings, or friends. A connectedness component was intended to capture present structural patterns within the gaming community. These measures indicate planning time for gaming with others, daily interaction with gamers, and having greater than half of their friends as gamers. Respondents were also asked whether they play in mostly (greater than half) or exclusively male groups.

To measure individuals’ exposure to various types of cultural content, gamers were asked to report preferences for nine of the most common video game genres. For each of these genres, example games were listed in case gamers were unfamiliar with the terms. Since this typology is relatively standard, and is frequently used on websites and magazines, most categories are widely understood. The common video game genres were rated on a seven-point scale from “don’t like at all” to “I love these types.” Respondents were also asked which of the U.S. game content ratings describes the games they play most often. As a validity check, open-ended questions provided an opportunity for respondents to list their favorite games.

These genre-guided questions were supplemented by 20 questions measuring gamers’ self-perceptions of their exposure to specific gendered messages. Jenkins’ (1998) description of video game “boy culture” guided the construction of these items. Using a five-point scale ranging from “never” to “almost always,” respondents were asked to estimate how often certain specific content like “killing or sniping from a distance” or “groups of people working together” appears in the games they typically play. While these categories obviously do not cover the
gamut of possible gender cues, they do reflect some of the most obvious. A final set of open-ended questions asked respondents to describe characteristics of male and female characters that others might find attractive. This data provides a qualitative confirmation of the gendered content obtained through the closed-ended questions.

A virtual performance section was composed primarily of questions comparing individual conceptions of self to in-game identities. On a scale from one to seven, gamers were asked to rate their perceptions of similarity to the characters they play. These were rated in terms of several key aspects of gendered identities: athletic ability, attractiveness, personality, problem solving ability, strength or toughness, masculinity or femininity, intelligence, and bravery. Additional questions asked how often (from never to almost always) they choose characters that are very similar to, very different from, and of a different gender. Open-ended questions were also provided in order to elicit gamers’ favorite characters. For real-world performances, gamers reported how strongly they agree with three statements describing competitive gaming behaviors and two regarding cooperative behaviors. Composite variables were then constructed indicating average agreement with these constructs.

To examine the effects of video game play context on each of these elements of masculinities, respondents were first asked to report the relative proportion (none, less than half, about half, more than half, or almost all) of their total gaming time they spend in games with other players. On the same scale, the gamers were asked how much time they spend in online games. From this information, dummy variables are constructed indicating whether the respondent spends half or more of their time in each of these contexts. The intent here is to categorize the
gamer by his modal, or *most frequent* gaming environment, while recognizing, of course, that many gamers spend portions of their time playing in all contexts. The resulting variables indicate whether the respondent spends time primarily in solo or multiplayer contexts; then, if the respondent is primarily a multiplayer type gamer, whether the multiplayer gaming occurs mostly offline and face-to-face, or online in a virtual environment.

When comparing the structural, cultural, and performance variables across contexts, this study utilizes only bivariate statistical analyses. Specifically, for the frequency counts of categorical variables, chi-square tests of independence are used; when the association is not significant, the comparison is not discussed in the text. For comparing the means of continuous variables across contexts, independent samples means comparisons t-tests are employed. Both the chi-square and t-test techniques are used to determine whether there are statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in survey items that capture elements of the tripartite gender framework between gamers who play most frequently by themselves and those who play mostly with others, and between the multiplayer gamers who typically play offline and those who play more often online. While the bivariate analysis provides important insights, it does not account for potentially spurious relationships. As described in the discussion section, future work should apply multivariate analyses both to control for other factors and to systematically model the relationships among associated variables.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Table 4.1 outlines the distribution of respondents across gaming contexts as well as the demographic control variables examined in this study. As the table shows, gamers are almost evenly split between solo and multiplayer contexts. About 54 percent of gamers report spending a majority of gaming time in single player settings. Within the multiplayer context, however, gamers are far more likely to prefer online gaming. As the offline and online multiplayer columns indicate, about 79 percent of the 549 primarily multiplayer gamers report playing mostly online. Though the offline solo gaming context classifies the majority of gamers, the popularity of multiplayer online gaming reflects a significant shift in video gaming behaviors. Individuals are increasingly choosing to spend gaming time in overwhelmingly social, and often virtual environments.

Due to recent shifts in the age distribution of video gamers, age is a key variable of interest in these analyses. Though younger gamers unsurprisingly make up the largest portion of the responses (about 40% are between 18 and 21), a number of older people also participate in gaming. About 67 percent of respondents are under 25 years old, with 40 percent of these from age 18 to 21. Ages 26 to 35 are 29 percent of the sample, and the remaining four percent is 36 years old or older.
## TABLE 4.1

### DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES BY PLAY CONTEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Solo</th>
<th>Multi</th>
<th>Offline Multi</th>
<th>Online Multi</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 to 21</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 to 25</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 to 29</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 35</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 or older</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
<td>82.0%</td>
<td>69.5%</td>
<td>85.4%</td>
<td>82.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Orientation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>94.3%</td>
<td>96.0%</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
<td>96.5%</td>
<td>95.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Geographic Region</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
<td>76.1%</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Respondents**: 634 (53.6%), 549 (46.4%), 118 (21.5%), 431 (78.5%), 1,183 (100%)
Across play contexts, substantial age differences are found. Using solo gaming as the baseline, multiplayer gaming appears to be somewhat polarized—older and younger gamers appear over-represented. Within the multiplayer context, however, the age distribution for the offline multiplayer setting has far more 18 to 21 year-olds while the online multiplayer setting has an disproportionate number of gamers age 36 and above.

The racial composition of gamers across contexts is less defined, though contextual differences are sometimes still significant. Overall, the sample overwhelmingly identifies with the White racial identity. About 82 percent of respondents report a White racial identity, while 2.5 percent report Black. Eight percent report each of Latino and Asian. Since respondents can choose multiple categories, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Across contexts, few racial differences are noted. Among these differences, Whites are under-represented in offline multiplayer settings, while Blacks and Latinos appear significantly over-represented. No significant differences in representation across gaming context are found for Asians.

Overall, about 95 percent of the sample report a heterosexual orientation. The remaining five percent are split nearly evenly across homosexual and bisexual orientations. For these identifications, no contextual differences are found. Although there were slight differences across the categories, none of them approach significance.

Since participants were recruited from a website with worldwide readership, respondents hail from a number of countries. About 72 percent of the complete responses originate within the United States, about 11 percent from Canada, and 18 percent elsewhere, primarily in Europe and Australia. This distribution differs
significantly across the game play contexts. Specifically, respondents in the United States are far more likely to participate in online multiplayer contexts, while the offline multiplayer context has a disproportionate number of respondents outside North America.

4.2 Elements of Masculinities by Gaming Context

4.2.1 Structures of Video Gaming

As stated previously, the patterns of gamers, both in gaining entry to the activity and throughout ongoing interactions, compose the gendered structural indicators for video gaming (see Table 4.2). Consistent with previous research, a large portion of gamers gain entry to the activity at an early age. Across the board, nearly 84 percent of gamers begin participating in video game play before age ten. All but two percent of gamers began playing video games before age 15. This seems to be constant regardless of respondents’ primary play context, since no significant differences are found across the four gaming contexts.

Initial pathways into gaming lead overwhelmingly through friends and family. Over half the respondents were introduced to gaming by friends, with about a third reporting a parent referral. Though the gender of the parent and friend referral is unknown, respondents are far more likely to be invited to video gaming by a male rather than a female sibling. About 18 percent of respondents report an introduction from a brother, with just under four percent reporting introductions from a sister. Only three respondents (0.25 percent) reported having been introduced to gaming by a girlfriend or spouse. Across the contexts, no significant differences in these initial pathways are found.
TABLE 4.2

STRUCTURAL FACTORS BY PLAY CONTEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Solo</th>
<th>Multi</th>
<th>Offline</th>
<th>Online</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial Pathways (pct. reporting)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before age 10</td>
<td>84.9%</td>
<td>82.3%</td>
<td>86.4%</td>
<td>81.2%</td>
<td>83.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
<td>53.6%</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connectedness (pct. reporting)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly gamer friends</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
<td>84.3%</td>
<td>91.5%</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
<td>80.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily interaction</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans game time</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>74.7%</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
<td>75.4%</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homosociality (pct. reporting)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male-only groups</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time Spent Gaming (mean, std. dev.)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Hours</td>
<td>12.74†</td>
<td>16.72†</td>
<td>11.34†</td>
<td>18.19‡</td>
<td>14.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.86)</td>
<td>(12.03)</td>
<td>(8.32)</td>
<td>(12.47)</td>
<td>(11.10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where applicable, independent samples t-tests are used to compare means across contexts. † indicates a significant difference (p < 0.05) between single and multi-player contexts, while ‡ indicates a significant difference (p < 0.05) between offline and online multiplayer contexts.
Once within the gaming community, gamers’ connectedness seems to vary systematically by context. Gamers who play primarily multiplayer games report significantly more often having a group of mostly gamer friends. Those who are primarily offline multiplayer gamers have an even higher frequency of mostly gamer friends. While about 82 percent of online multiplayer gamers report mostly gamer friends, 91.5 percent of offline multiplayer gamers report the same. Only 77 percent of primarily solo gamers report such a friendship composition. Under a chi-square test of independence, these differences are found to be significant at the 0.01 level. Similarly, multiplayer gamers are significantly more likely to report daily interaction with other gamers as well as an intent to plan gaming time with others. However, among multiplayer gamers the differences in daily interaction and planning gaming time is not significant.

While solo gamers spend most of their time playing alone, when they do choose to play with others, they seem to be far more likely to report homosocial, male-only groups than are multiplayer gamers. This distinction becomes somewhat muted, however, when the multiplayer contexts are divided. Not all multiplayer gamers are less likely to play in male-only groups. While online multiplayer gamers report male-only groups far less frequently than do solo gamers, offline multiplayer gamers are similar to solo gamers in group composition. This finding indicates a contextual difference in one key element of masculinity construction; that is, the presence of a homosocial “locker-room” type environment. While solo and offline multiplayer gaming seem to facilitate this arrangement, the same is not true for the online multiplayer setting. It is unclear, however, whether the online multiplayer gamers are truly playing in mixed gender groups, or simply think they are. After all, the anonymity of many online games might allow players to misrepresent their
true gender.

It should also be noted that there are significant differences in the amount of time gamers spend in the various gaming contexts. That is, the structural arrangement of particular contexts leads to longer amounts of time spent playing in that context. For instance, online multiplayer gamers spend nearly six more hours gaming on average than do solo gamers, and nearly seven more hours than offline multiplayer gamers. This accounts for the overall difference between solo and multiplayer gamers. Offline multiplayer gamers, on average, appear to play more than an hour less than solo gamers. These differences likely reflect a varying degree of social investment required to participate in game play in each context. In addition, online multiplayer gaming may provide social structures that supplant other real-world relationships.

4.2.2 Video Game Culture

One proxy for understanding common symbols within the gaming community is by examining preference for popular genres. Table 4.3 outlines nine of the most common game genres, with the average rating of each genre for the various gaming contexts. Consistent with prior research, action-adventure, first-person shooters, and role playing games are among the most preferred, with average ratings above 5.5 on a seven-point scale. Among respondents in this survey, sports games are the lowest-rated—a surprising finding given the genre’s status as one of the top-selling in the United States. For the nine genres examined in this study, sports is the only type that is disliked by gamers, on average. The remaining eight categories all rate positively on the preference scale.
# TABLE 4.3

GAME TYPE PREFERENCE BY PLAY CONTEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Solo</th>
<th>Multi</th>
<th>Offline Multi</th>
<th>Online Multi</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Genre Preference (mean, SD; 1 = dislike, 4 = neutral, 7 = love)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving or racing</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>5.14†</td>
<td>4.67†</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.67)</td>
<td>(1.61)</td>
<td>(1.37)</td>
<td>(1.65)</td>
<td>(1.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.95)</td>
<td>(1.84)</td>
<td>(1.85)</td>
<td>(1.83)</td>
<td>(1.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action-adventure</td>
<td>6.23†</td>
<td>6.04†</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>6.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.03)</td>
<td>(1.12)</td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>(1.13)</td>
<td>(1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platformers</td>
<td>5.39†</td>
<td>5.12†</td>
<td>5.53†</td>
<td>5.01†</td>
<td>5.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.49)</td>
<td>(1.56)</td>
<td>(1.36)</td>
<td>(1.60)</td>
<td>(1.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role-playing (RPGs)</td>
<td>5.42†</td>
<td>5.69†</td>
<td>5.29†</td>
<td>5.80†</td>
<td>5.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.78)</td>
<td>(1.75)</td>
<td>(1.85)</td>
<td>(1.70)</td>
<td>(1.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-person shooters</td>
<td>5.40†</td>
<td>6.15†</td>
<td>5.55†</td>
<td>6.31†</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.66)</td>
<td>(1.26)</td>
<td>(1.53)</td>
<td>(1.13)</td>
<td>(1.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>4.73†</td>
<td>5.08†</td>
<td>4.75†</td>
<td>5.17†</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.79)</td>
<td>(1.68)</td>
<td>(1.78)</td>
<td>(1.65)</td>
<td>(1.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.69‡</td>
<td>4.13‡</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.78)</td>
<td>(1.73)</td>
<td>(1.80)</td>
<td>(1.69)</td>
<td>(1.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puzzle</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.72)</td>
<td>(1.77)</td>
<td>(1.70)</td>
<td>(1.79)</td>
<td>(1.75)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Most Frequent Content Rating (pct. reporting)**

- “Everybody” 16.1% 8.9% 22.0% 5.3% 12.8%
- “Teen” 47.6% 47.4% 52.5% 45.9% 47.5%
- “Mature” 36.3% 43.7% 25.4% 48.7% 39.7%

Where applicable, independent samples t-tests are used to compare means across contexts. † indicates a significant difference (p < 0.05) between single and multi-player contexts, while ‡ indicates a significant difference (p < 0.05) between offline and online multiplayer contexts.
TABLE 4.4

CONTENT THEMES BY PLAY CONTEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Solo</th>
<th>Multi</th>
<th>Offline Multi</th>
<th>Online Multi</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.10)</td>
<td>(1.07)</td>
<td>(1.00)</td>
<td>(1.08)</td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role play</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>4.33†</td>
<td>4.15†</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>3.40†</td>
<td>3.74†</td>
<td>3.37‡</td>
<td>3.84‡</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroes</td>
<td>4.35†</td>
<td>4.17†</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>3.73†</td>
<td>3.85†</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood</td>
<td>3.71†</td>
<td>3.82†</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>2.63†</td>
<td>2.41†</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex appeal</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where applicable, independent samples t-tests are used to compare means across contexts. † indicates a significant difference (p < 0.05) between single and multi-player contexts, while ‡ indicates a significant difference (p < 0.05) between offline and online multiplayer contexts.
As expected, genre preference is closely linked to one’s most frequent game play context. Although the most-preferred games are similar across context, their order differs. For solo gamers, action-adventure, RPGs, and first-person shooters comprise the top three, while the order changes to first-person shooters, action-adventure, and RPGs for multiplayer gamers. Additionally, there are significant differences in degree of preference between these contexts. For instance, action-adventure and platform games are slightly more preferred by solo gamers, while RPGs, strategy games, and first-person shooters are preferred by multiplayer gamers. In four cases there seem to be no significant differences between solo and multiplayer gamers. These genres are driving, sports, fighting, and puzzle games. However, in two of these cases, driving and fighting, there are preference differences between the offline and online multiplayer settings.

In general, offline and online gamers are often heterogeneous in terms of genre preference. Significant differences are found for six of the nine genres. Specifically, offline multiplayer gamers strongly prefer driving or racing, platformers, and fighting games, while online multiplayer gamers strongly prefer RPGs, first-person shooters, and strategy games. Across these categories, the deviation between offline and online multiplayer gamers is larger in magnitude than the differences between solo and multiplayer gamers. However, it appears that the solo-multi variation is understated because of the homogeneity within the multiplayer context.

Another indicator of prevalent symbolic themes is the content rating assigned to video games. Table 4.3 presents the percentages of respondents who spend a majority of their gaming time in each of the three classifications: “everybody,” “teen,” and “mature.” The data indicate that nearly half of all respondents play
primarily “teen” games, while a majority of the remainder plays mostly “mature” oriented games. Only about 13 percent of all gamers play mostly games targeted at individuals of all ages. Games for “everybody” seem to be over-represented for solo-type gamers, while “mature” games are similarly over-represented in multiplayer contexts. Splitting the multiplayer gamers reveals even greater variation. In doing so, “everybody” and “teen” games appear strongly over-represented for offline gamers, while “mature” is over-represented for online multiplayer gamers. Using solo gaming as a baseline, the data imply that offline multiplayer gamers are more likely to see content appropriate for teens or younger, while online multiplayer gamers are more likely to experience “mature” content.

In addition to using genres as a proxy for content, this study also examines the appearance of nine specific gendered themes found in the games respondents play. In table 4.4 the appearance of these themes is listed, with higher numbers indicating a greater frequency of the theme’s appearance. Among the themes, the presence of heroes and villains (4.26) and exploration (4.25) are the most common, appearing in most of the games respondents play. Violence (3.79) and blood (3.76) are also fairly common, as are war (3.56), role playing (3.56), and sex appeal (3.49). Romance (2.53) and sports (2.39) are the least-reported themes.

The general lack of significant differences across contexts—and small substantive differences—seems to suggest that these themes prevail somewhat uniformly throughout games of all types. Yet subtle differences do exist between solo and multiplayer contexts. Exploration, heroes, and romance are slightly more common in solo contexts, whereas war, violence, and blood are slightly more common in multiplayer contexts. While these differences are substantively small, they likely indicate minor differences in the overarching themes in the games played in these
contexts. However, as the breakdown of online and offline contexts indicates, the greater frequency of these items in multiplayer contexts is the result of their greater frequency in the online setting. The theme of war games differs significantly between online and offline settings. The data indicate that more violent games, and particularly war games, are played in a virtual context.

4.2.3 Gendered Gaming Performances

Gamers perform gender by taking control of characters within the game, as well as outside the game through performance of a personal conception of identity. Gamers might project themselves into the characters, or the characters may provide an outlet to express another side of identity. As table 4.5 depicts, in general the latter case is more prevalent. On average, gamers report a greater likelihood of playing as a character “very different” from themselves than one “very similar.” This finding is consistent across all play contexts. However, solo gamers are significantly more likely than multiplayer gamers to perform a “very different” role; and conversely, multiplayer gamers are significantly more likely to report playing as “very similar” characters. In short, increased sociability of a context is associated with increased likelihood that a gamer will play as a character similar to himself.

Looking at the performance of “virtual transgender” follows a similar pattern across the game play contexts. Consistent with the finding above, solo gamers are more likely to play as characters unlike themselves. Specifically, male solo gamers tend to play significantly more often as females than do those who typically play in multiplayer settings. When the multiplayer group is divided into the offline and online contexts, this difference becomes clearer. Online multiplayer gamers, despite the anonymity of the online environment, report a significantly greater
TABLE 4.5

GENDER PERFORMANCES BY PLAY CONTEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Solo</th>
<th>Multi</th>
<th>Offline Multi</th>
<th>Online Multi</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Similarity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very similar to self</td>
<td>1.83†</td>
<td>1.97†</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.00)</td>
<td>(1.01)</td>
<td>(1.07)</td>
<td>(1.00)</td>
<td>(1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very different from self</td>
<td>2.66†</td>
<td>2.52†</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.02)</td>
<td>(1.01)</td>
<td>(0.98)</td>
<td>(1.02)</td>
<td>(1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different gender</td>
<td>1.71†</td>
<td>1.53†</td>
<td>1.76‡</td>
<td>1.46‡</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td>(0.84)</td>
<td>(0.94)</td>
<td>(0.90)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Trait Similarity (mean, SD; 1 = not at all, 7 = very similar)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Solo</th>
<th>Multi</th>
<th>Offline Multi</th>
<th>Online Multi</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>3.45†</td>
<td>3.75†</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.61)</td>
<td>(1.55)</td>
<td>(1.36)</td>
<td>(1.60)</td>
<td>(1.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity</td>
<td>3.93†</td>
<td>4.15†</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.59)</td>
<td>(1.52)</td>
<td>(1.36)</td>
<td>(1.56)</td>
<td>(1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>4.14†</td>
<td>4.39†</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.62)</td>
<td>(1.50)</td>
<td>(1.34)</td>
<td>(1.55)</td>
<td>(1.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>3.70†</td>
<td>3.97†</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.51)</td>
<td>(1.45)</td>
<td>(1.26)</td>
<td>(1.50)</td>
<td>(1.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>4.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.46)</td>
<td>(1.49)</td>
<td>(1.37)</td>
<td>(1.52)</td>
<td>(1.53)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where applicable, independent samples t-tests are used to compare means across contexts. † indicates a significant difference (p < 0.05) between single and multi-player contexts, while ‡ indicates a significant difference (p < 0.05) between offline and online multiplayer contexts.
frequency of playing as same-sex characters than do the offline multiplayer gamers. Yet when the multiplayer context is split in this way, males in the offline group report the greatest likelihood of playing as female characters, albeit the group differs only slightly from the solo context.

Gamers relate to their characters in a variety of ways. In particular, physical traits seem less important than personality traits. Across all respondents, gamers report feeling similar to their characters in terms of intelligence and bravery. They report fewer similarities in masculinity, attractiveness, and physical strength. Yet across the gaming contexts, there are significant differences between multiplayer and solo reports of character similarity. Specifically, multiplayer gamers in general seem to relate more closely to their characters across all of the traits but intelligence, which is roughly equal to the solo context. Again, this finding is consistent with the the result above, in which online players are more likely to play as characters similar to themselves. Examining the within multiplayer group differences, it appears that the online multiplayer gamers relate more strongly to their characters. Although there are differences within the multiplayer setting between offline and online groups, these never reach significance. Taking the results at face value, however, it seems that multiplayer gamers—and particularly online multiplayer gamers—relate to their characters regardless of the personality trait examined.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this project was to identify differences in the elements of masculinities associated with single player, online multiplayer, and offline multiplayer video gaming contexts. Using Messner’s (2002) tri-level gender framework, significant differences in the gender constructing process among the environments have been found. This indicates that video gaming contexts are heterogeneous spheres, with different structural, cultural, and performative aspects. It is likely, then, that different masculinities could emerge from the environments, shaped according to the factors unique to the context. Of course, since gaming as a whole is embedded in an overarching gender order, there will undoubtedly also be similarities.

In the past, many studies have looked only at the games’ influence over children. This study’s findings suggest that researchers must now consider a far wider range of ages when examining these effects. However, there is still an abundance of younger players, particularly under age 21, and the majority of people begin gaming at a very young age. It seems, also, that age is closely related to the preferred gaming context. Developmental factors, then, may contribute to differences in not only the types of content one is exposed to, but also the environment in which the content is disseminated.

Even outside of demographic contextual differences, aspects of video gaming that are likely to be related to masculinities differ by context. Structural arrange-
ments most clearly delineate the three contexts. Clear cultural and performative differences are also apparent, though these factors vary less strongly across the three contexts. Many of the themes in video games are so pervasive that they are reportedly encountered frequently in games of all types. Furthermore, gamers report an affinity toward a wide variety of games. This homogeneity in genre preference diminishes the differences between the groups’ prevalent cultural themes. After taking this into account, however, small cross-contextual differences still reveal important distinctions between the game play environments. For both very popular genres as well as for those that are less popular, context seems to matter.

The single player context, by nature, is starkly defined by fewer connections to other gamers. However, these gamers still tend to report, more often than not, having mostly gamer friends. Gamers preferring this environment tend to spend about six fewer hours gaming per week than those who prefer online games, but just over an hour more than offline multiplayer gamers. This context is also defined by a slight preference for platform games, RPGs, and action-adventure games—genres that tend to be more heavily story-driven. Hence, the finding that solo gamers report more instances of exploration, heroes, and romance than do the multiplayer gamers is unsurprising. Lastly, in terms of performance, solo gamers report playing as characters similar to themselves less frequently than multiplayer gamers, particularly so for online multiplayer gamers. They are also more likely to report playing as a different gender. This difference is potentially due to the constraints placed on the gamer due to the narrative format; that is, the player must control whatever character is imposed upon them by the story.

Offline multiplayer gamers seem to maintain very strong connections with other gamers, but spend fewer hours per week in gaming sessions. It seems likely that
this relationship is due to the social investment necessary to gather a group of gamers together to play such games. This context is also most likely to report an exclusively male environment. Gamers in this group, relative to those in the online multiplayer category, seem to prefer fighting and driving or racing games. It should be noted also that although the difference for sports games is not statistically significant, the offline multiplayer group rates them the highest across the contexts by a fairly large margin. With this in mind, it would seem that gamers in this context spend greater amounts of time, on average, in potentially competitive environments. Offline multiplayer gamers are also significantly more likely to report greater frequency of cross-gender character play than online multiplayer gamers.

Similar to offline multiplayer gamers, those in the online context tend to report frequent connections with other gamers. The results of this study also confirm the prior findings that online gamers tend to spend greater amounts of time gaming and tend to have a greater proportion of older gamers (Griffiths et al. 2003, Williams and Skoric 2005, Yee 2006). Since the most common online multiplayer games are online RPGs, first-person shooters, and strategy games, the significant preference for these types, relative to the offline multiplayer group, is expected. Interestingly, online multiplayer gamers report almost exclusively spending time split between games targeted for “teen” or “mature” audiences. While this is perhaps related to the older age of this group, the finding suggests that those spending time in this context tend to spend more time exposed to potentially violent or sexual themes. Indeed, multiplayer gamers in general report significantly greater frequencies of themes of war, violence, and blood than do single player gamers.
Future research on video games and gender should focus on developing empirically valid indicators for each of the three components of the tripartite framework. While this thesis has looked at multiple indicators of structural, cultural, and performance differences, it would be preferable to construct multi-item scales that measure each component. More work should be done in order to conceptualize the specific types of performances associated with video gaming, both in-game and in the real-world.

Furthermore, in order to fully understand video game gender dynamics, it is important to better understand the interactions and connections among the mutually-interacting components. As noted in the methodology section, multivariate statistical techniques are more apt at controlling for potentially spurious relationships and modeling interactions among the many components of masculinities. Qualitative research, such as ethnographic observations or in-depth interviews, might also provide a rich set of data for studying the elements that underlie the gendering dynamics of video gaming.

Yet regardless of the specific methodology employed, this study has demonstrated the importance of examining contextual variation in the structural, cultural, and performative dimensions of gender. Systematic differences highlighted in this research in these elements across the three video gaming environments—single player, offline multiplayer, and online multiplayer—are likely to be related to important differences in how male gamers perceive and construct masculine identities. In short, as this research has shown, it is not sufficient to examine only the content of the video games people play. The context in which games are played and consumed is also important.
APPENDIX A

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Initial Questions

1. How old are you? (under 18 years old, from 18 to 21, from 22 to 25, from 26 to 29, from 30 to 35, over 35)

2. Video games are played on computers or consoles like Playstation 2, GameCube, XBOX, or Game Boy Advance. Some popular games are “Super Mario Bros.,” “The Sims,” “World of Warcraft,” “Final Fantasy,” “Halo,” and “Grand Theft Auto 3.” On average, how often do you play these types of video games? (I have never played video games, once a month or less, once every few weeks, once a week, a few times a week, almost every day)

Structural Questions

1. How old were you when you started playing video games? (under 10 years old, between 10 and 15 years old, between 15 and 20 years old, between 20 and 25 years old, older than 25 years old)

2. How did you first become interested in playing video games? Check all that apply. (a friend or friends, a brother, a sister, a parent, a boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse, magazines, books, or newspapers, television or movies, the internet, don’t remember, other)
3. On average, when you sit down to play video games, how long do you play before stopping for the day? (less than 15 minutes, 15 to 30 minutes, 30 minutes to an hour, 1–2 hours, 2–3 hours, 3–4 hours, longer than 4 hours)

4. On average, how often do you purchase new or used video games, either at a store or online? (never, about once or twice a year, about every other month, about once a month, about every other week, about weekly, more than once per week, daily)

5. On average, how often do you rent video games, either at a store or through a mail service? (never, about once or twice a year, about every other month, about once a month, about every other week, about weekly, more than once per week, daily)

6. On average, how often do you borrow from or trade games with friends or other people? (never, about once or twice a year, about every other month, about once a month, about every other week, about weekly, more than once per week, daily)

7. On average, how often do you sell used games back to a store or online? (never, about once or twice a year, about every other month, about once a month, about every other week, about weekly, more than once per week, daily)

8. Please indicate which of the following consoles you currently own. Check all that apply. (Playstation 2, XBOX, XBOX 360, GameCube, Gameboy Advance, Nintendo DS, Sony PSP, A computer that you use at least sometimes for gaming, classic or retro gaming systems such as Playstation 1, Nintendo NES, or Atari, other)
9. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: I don’t play video games as much as I would like. (strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion, agree, strongly agree)

10. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: I purposefully make time for video games. (strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion, agree, strongly agree)

11. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: I play video games mostly in my spare time. (strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion, agree, strongly agree)

12. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: I plan times to play video games with others. (strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion, agree, strongly agree)

13. What portion of your closest friends also plays video games? (none, less than half, about half, more than half, almost all)

14. How do you typically learn about new video games. Check all that apply. (advertisements on television, magazines about video games, internet websites, friends, family, a boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse, places that sell video games, other)

15. How often do you talk or communicate with other people who play games? (less than once a month, about once a month, about once a week, almost every day, every day)

16. In what ways do you communicate with other people who play games? Check all that apply. (in person, on the telephone, video game websites, online chat
programs like AOL IM or Skype, email, through online games, other)

17. In an average week, how many hours do you spend playing video games? (open ended)

18. Of the total amount of time you play video games in an average week, what portion is in games with other players? (none, less than half, about half, more than half, almost all)

19. Of the total amount of time you play video games in an average week, what percentage is in online games? (none, less than half, about half, more than half, almost all)

20. Think about the games you play with others. How many people are typically playing at the same time. Check all that apply. (two, three or four, between 5 and 8, between 8 and 12, between 12 and 32, between 32 and 64, more than 64, don’t know, other)

21. When you play games with others, would you say that the groups of people you play with are usually... (only male, mostly male, equally male and female, mostly female, only female, don’t know)

**Cultural Questions**

1. Please list some of your favorite games. (open ended)

2. Please rate how much you like driving or racing games like Gran Turismo, Super Mario Kart, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)

3. Please rate how much you like sports games like Madden Football or FIFA soccer (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)
4. Please rate how much you like platform games like Super Mario Bros., Sonic the Hedgehog, Jak & Daxter, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)

5. Please rate how much you like action/adventure games like Legend of Zelda, Grand Theft Auto, Metal Gear Solid, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)

6. Please rate how much you like anime games like Pokemon, Yu-Gi-Oh!, Dragon Ball Z, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)

7. Please rate how much you like role-playing games or RPGs like Final Fantasy, World of Warcraft, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)

8. Please rate how much you like first-person shooters like Halo, Half-Life, Battlefield, Doom, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)

9. Please rate how much you like strategy games like The Sims, Starcraft, Civilization, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)

10. Please rate how much you like fighting games like Tekken, Dead or Alive, Virtua Fighter, Soul Caliber, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)

11. Please rate how much you like survival horror games like Resident Evil, Fatal Frame, Silent Hill, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)
12. Please rate how much you like music games like Dance Dance Revolution, Guitar Hero, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)

13. Please rate how much you like card, board, or puzzle games like Tetris, Solitaire, Hearts, Chess, etc. (7-point scale from don’t like at all to I love these types)

14. What types of games do you play with other people? Check all that apply. (driving or racing, sports, platform, survival horror, action games not based on realistic war, war simulations, fighting, strategy, online role-playing games without a subscription fee, online role-playing games with a subscription fee, music, card or puzzle games, other)

15. Video games in the United States have ratings based on their content. “E” are games considered OK for all ages. “T” games are designed for teenagers, aged 13-years-old and above. Games with the “M” rating are designed for mature audiences, 17-years-old and above. Which of these types of games would you say that you play most often? (games for all ages, games for teenagers, games for mature audiences, don’t know)

16. Please indicate how often heroes and villains, “good guys” or “bad guys” appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

17. Please indicate how often exploring new places appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

18. Please indicate how often swearing or cursing appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)
19. Please indicate how often learning difficult moves, jumps, or abilities appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

20. Please indicate how often clear winners and losers appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

21. Please indicate how often violence against human beings appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

22. Please indicate how often blood or other realistic signs of violence appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

23. Please indicate how often taking sides in a war appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

24. Please indicate how often role-playing appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

25. Please indicate how often choosing from several different characters appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

26. Please indicate how often groups of people working together appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

27. Please indicate how often sneaking around or spying on others appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)
28. Please indicate how often killing or “sniping” people from a distance appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

29. Please indicate how often earning, finding, or collecting money or valuable objects appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

30. Please indicate how often death or dying or losing “lives” appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

31. Please indicate how often driving fast, or racing cars or ships appears in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

32. Please indicate how often romantic relationships appear in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

33. Please indicate how often beautiful, attractive, or sexy female characters appear in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

34. Please indicate how often beautiful, attractive, or sexy male characters appear in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

35. Please indicate how often sports or athletic competitions appear in the games you play. (never, once in a while, sometimes, often, almost always)

36. Please describe some of the male characters you think people would find attractive, handsome, beautiful, or “sexy” in the games you play. (open ended)
37. Please describe some of the female characters you think people would find attractive, handsome, beautiful, or "sexy" in the games you play. (open ended)

**Performance Questions**

1. Who are your favorite video game characters? Why are they your favorites? (open ended)

2. Think about the characters you choose to play as. On a scale from 1 to 7, where 7 indicates very similar, please indicate how similar the characters are to you in each of the following ways. (1 to 7 scale for each of the following: athletic ability, attractiveness, personality/attitude/sense of humor, problem solving ability, strength or toughness, masculinity or femininity, intelligence, courage or bravery)

3. How often do you play as characters that are very similar to yourself? (almost always, fairly often, sometimes, once in a while, never)

4. How often would you say you play as characters that are very different from yourself? (almost always, fairly often, sometimes, once in a while, never)

5. How often would you say you play as characters that are a different gender from yourself? (almost always, fairly often, sometimes, once in a while, never)

6. Does having characters that are attractive, handsome, beautiful, or "sexy" increase your enjoyment of video games? (yes a lot, yes a fair amount, yes a little bit, no it doesn’t really impact my enjoyment)
7. When you communicate with other gamers, what do you talk about. Check all that apply. (video games, romantic relationships or dating, politics, sports, school, parents or family, music, sex, other)

**Demographic Questions**

1. Where are you from? (United States, Canada, Mexico, other)

2. What gender are you? (female, male, transgender, prefer not to answer, other)

3. What is your sexual orientation? (heterosexual, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, prefer not to answer, other)

4. What race or ethnic group do you consider yourself. Check all that apply. (white/caucasian/anglo, black or African-American, Hispanic/Latino/Latina, Asian/Asian-American/Pacific Islander, American Indian or Native American, other)

5. What is your current relationship status? (married, living with unmarried partner, single but in serious or committed relationship, single but not in a committed relationship, prefer not to answer, other)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


