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Feminist geographies of online gaming

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies opportunities and pathways through which feminist digital geographies can expand into the realm of online gaming. Whilst research at the nexus of gender and online gaming has come a long way in the past two decades, geographical perspectives are noticeably lacking. They can contribute to the discourse by emphasising the contingent nature of online gamespaces, and how a gendered subject position might be redefined through, and help to redefine, the (in)distinctions between "online" and "offline", "gaming" and "non-gaming" spaces. I identify four directions in which feminist geographies of online gaming can unfold: aesthetic-affective spaces of the "virtually real", relationality through and beyond the avatar, labours of play and the purpose of leisure, and non-gaming spaces and the gaming of space. These directions foreground an exploration of gender within/and online gaming that is ontologically open, spatially fluid and replete with epistemological potential.

1. Introduction

For a long time, video games have been primarily associated with a male player base, which has come to determine the normativities of gaming culture. Despite evidence to suggest an increase in the number of female gamers over the years (Chess & Shaw, 2015), the idea that 'games (especially digital games) speak more readily to boys' (Bergstrom, 2019: 841; after Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Burrill, 2008) continues to shape practices of (game)play. To a large degree, these ideas and normativities have come to shape research on gaming as well. Whilst cyberfeminist scholarship once argued that 'the Internet had liberating qualities that could free us from the confines of our gendered bodies' (Gray, 2018: 293), these qualities remain unrealised. Indeed, as much as online video games are, by definition, played in full or in part through the Internet, the Internet has been shown to exacerbate, rather than challenge or reconfigure, the gender-based biases of the "real" world. The Gamergate saga,[1] which began in 2014 and is still debated today, is an important reminder of how misogynistic, heteronormative and anti-progressive gaming culture can be. Initially an internet backlash against claims that a female game developer traded sex for a positive game review, the antifemale harassment that ensued has become symptomatic of an industry that continues to be defined by a masculinist orientation that still largely defines the terms of gaming discourse (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017; Salter, 2018; Thornham, 2009).

Slowly, however, things are changing. Just as female gamers are becoming better represented in gaming circles, so too are scholarly understandings of the ways in which they might resist, redefine or otherwise reproduce the lingering masculinist gaze and logics of online gamespaces. This paper outlines how geographers can to contribute to these understandings. As a starting point, and to draw attention to the fact that gamespaces include both the virtual, but also *non*-virtual, spaces in and through which games are played – I note Bryce and Rutter's (2003: 7, original emphasis) observations that.

> the complexity of the gendering of game context and its reception requires examination in context and in situ as the spaces in which games are played are crucial in understanding the complex ways in which computer gaming is gendered and female participation is constrained. […] Further, this represents a move towards the study of more transient aspects of computer gaming as public and private spaces become 'gaming spaces' for a period of time through either formal or informal action.

Written in 2003, at a time when smart phones and other mobile digital technologies were still embryonic, these observations are prescient and highlight some of the limitations of existing understandings of women in/and online gaming. The "complexity of… gendering" hints at the need for intersectional understandings of how players relate to the

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[1] Gamergate was a protracted campaign of online harassment against several prominent women in the video game industry. It has become symptomatic of both growing female influence in the industry, but also the chauvinism and anti-progressivism that continues to define gaming culture (see Gray et al., 2017).

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game, to the avatar (that is, the manifestations of players *in* the game), and to each other. Taking these ideas further, there is a need for a theoretical shift to look beyond gender as a category and to explore instead feminism as a perspective through which gaming cultures can be interpreted and understood. Further, an explicit focus on the "spaces in which games are played" and, in particular, the "transient aspects of computer gaming" foregrounds the need to think through how not just online and offline, but also gaming and *non*-gaming, spaces work for and against the realisation of gendered subjectivities in a world of pervasive digital connectivity. Moving between these spaces is a constant – and underexplored – preoccupation of online gamers, meaning a feminist perspective can provide critical insight into the 'constraints and possibilities of the complex, paradoxical and contingent' (McLean, Maalsen, & Prebble, 2019: 740) spatialities that might be generated by, but which extend beyond, the digital. Understandings of how these spaces intersect with gendered ways of being and playing are needed to uncover the full extent of how people "do" gender through the structuring logics of online gamespaces (after Turkle, 1995; Eklund, 2011).

Even though online games remain a marginal area of interest to geographers (cf. Ash & Gallacher, 2011), there is much that geography can contribute to the discourse. Recent developments in digital geographies have sought to 'grappl[e] with the messiness of the digital mediation of everyday lives' by exploring, for example, how 'digitality (re)produces power and extant sociospatial inequalities along lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, ability and more' (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018: 630; after Massey, 1994; Rose, 1994). This call-to-action focusses on the ways in which a feminist geography of online gaming must recognise the relational, diverse and non-differentiated nature of spaces that are occupied and experienced in both online and offline environments. Whilst feminist geographers have advanced the idea of mediated space – contingent spaces that blend online/offline properties (after Leszczynski, 2015) – my expansion brings the idea of mediated space to bear on the gaming and *non*-gaming spaces of online play. That is, to start from the premise that as much as online/offline spaces are non-differentiated, *so too* are their gaming/non-gaming dimensions. Indeed, the same logic of non-differentiation applies to the player, their avatars, and to other players as well. Given that Elwood (2020: 1) recently emphasised the 'political and epistemological urgen[cy]' of theorising digital practices of everyday life that might 'refuse normative digital-social-spatial relations of technocapitalist urban life, and catalyze sociospatial relations of thriving otherwise', we can begin to appreciate the epistemological potential that exists at the nexus of feminist digital geographies and gaming research. Dislocating the playful aspects of online gaming from the virtual gamespace, and using them as a heuristic to understand the new worldviews and methods of participation that go beyond masculinist normativities, can offer an important counterpoint to the 'digital sociospatial hegemonies' (Elwood, 2020: 2) that have long defined gaming culture.

Four sections follow. The first deploys three lenses – (non-)participant, stereotype and victim-activist – to categorise and explore existing research at the nexus of gender and gaming. The second identifies areas of opportunity through which the discourse can be expanded. The third explores recent developments in feminist digital geographies, the aim being to highlight the synergies that exist at the point where the two discourses meet. The fourth identifies four directions – aesthetic-affective spaces of the "virtually real", relationality through and beyond the avatar, labours of play and the purpose of leisure, and non-gaming spaces and the gaming of space – through which feminist geographies of online gaming can unfold.

2. Normativities and assumptions in the gendered division of gaming

Research that explores the nexus of gender and gaming is relatively recent, and only really started to gain traction after the publication of Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassell's edited volume, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* in 1998. Heralding an expansion beyond the technical dimensions of games and an embrace of their social, cultural and political intersections as well, research has subsequently cleaved into two "waves". A first wave emerged in the late-1990s, and sought to understand the under-representation of female players within gaming communities. Scholarship explored the effects of what is known as the "girl game movement" – so called because it focusses on games designed specifically for girls, and which tended, therefore, to reproduce rather than complicate or challenge gendered divisions of play. A second wave, associated with research since the 2010s, adopted a more critical perspective in response to growing numbers of female gamers. Targeting first the girl game movement, and subsequently the gaming industry, this wave.

> point[ed] out that designing for girls' interests painted gender as a static construct, privileged male experiences as the norm and female experiences as the alternative, invoked traditional stereotypes that could miss the mark in engaging girls in computing trajectories, did not consider the variability of age and interests, and did not wholly address the role of physical and social barriers to play (Richard & Gray, 2018: 115–116).

Largely associated with the emergence of feminist media studies, this second wave can be interpreted as a response to the 'tiresome and worrying persistence of familiar themes and unremarkable findings from which research in this field has seldom wavered' (Jenson & de Castell, 2010: 52). It advances the idea that women are actively remaking gaming culture through their involvements in it, and their apparent transgressions therein (Consalvo, 2012; Gray, Voorhees, & Vossen, 2018). In the subsections that follow, three lenses – women as (non-) participant, stereotype and victim-activist – are used to expose the normativities and assumptions that define research at the nexus of women and gaming.

2.1. (Non-)participant

Whilst female participation in gaming culture is increasing, it remains a relatively recent phenomenon. Research has, for some decades now, sought to understanding the gendered division of participation in gaming that has emerged from non-participation. Social role theory in particular provides a framework through which non-participation has been understood, and is based on the idea that from a young age, males and females are socialised into gender roles that speak to their respective physical capacities: bearing and raising children for women, providing for and protecting the family for men (Jansz, Avis, & Vosmeer, 2010). Empirical research has shown how girls tend to be socialised away from video games, and towards activities that nurture compassion and empathy, at a young age (De Castell & Bryson, 1998; Thornham, 2009). Adding nuance to these structures of socialisation is work that explores the gendering of leisure, and how females might be less likely to feel entitled to clearly delineated leisure time as males as their "work" has traditionally been associated with managing the home (Deem, 1986; Shank, 1986). Structuring gender along these lines has been shown to have a psychological effect on female encounters with gaming culture. Crawford and Godbey (1987; see also Junin and Henderson, 2001), for example, show how this can lead to intrapersonal barriers (the socialisation into leisure activities deemed "appropriate"), interpersonal barriers (including family size and expectations) and external barriers (including work schedules and financial resources) that might prevent participation in gameplay. As a result, female engagement with games has been commonly "labelled as 'casual' or not as invested as the play of their male counterparts" (Bergstrom, 2019: 844; after Juul, 2010), which, in turn, has been shown to reproduce the cycle of non-participation.

Whilst such ideas continue to hold true in a general sense, recent work has seen them being interpreted in more expansive, and nuanced,

ways. In terms of expansion, understandings of barriers to participation have extended beyond the home and the social structuring of gender therein, and have addressed the gaming industry as well. The fact that the 'design and content of games, the under-representation of women working in gaming industries and competing at elite levels, and assumptions that women's gaming skills are inferior to those of male-identifying players' (Easpaig & Humphrey, 2017: 554) has been used to critique the girl game movement. These games, which include traditionally female interests such as cooking in *Diner Dash*, or babysitting in *Babysitting Mama*, or gossiping in *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*, all seek to reproduce normative gender structures through the gamespace. They paradoxically serve to include female gamers within a specifically gendered niche that is distinct from mainstream gaming culture. In terms of nuance, research has looked beyond barriers to participation and identified the barriers to inclusion into ostensibly male gamespaces (Clark-Parsons, 2017), and the reasons for women leaving games as well (Bergstrom, 2019). Critical scholarship has also challenged the a priori assumption of "gamer" as category, explicating the different modalities of play instead. For example, Yates and Littleton (1999) draw on ethnographic research to show how women actively select and negotiate their own subject positions when engaging with games. Similarly, Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, and Consalvo (2007); also Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007) differentiate between female power-gamers, moderate-gamers and non-gamers according to the extent to which gaming is integrated into their everyday lives, and how game mastery and/or escapism might be motivating factors for play.

2.2. Stereotype

The female as stereotype lens has two dimensions to it: one is females as character (or avatar) that exists within the gamespace, the second is the female as player. In terms of character, discourse has focussed on textual analyses, with a general observation being that there is a distinct tendency for game content to 'contain gendered, patriarchal and stereotypical representations of females, and a general lack of female game characters' (Bryce & Rutter, 2003: 6; see also Kinder, 1996; Dietz, 1998). The stereotypical representations mentioned here cause traditionally female traits and characteristics to be emphasised. Thus, female characters might play the role of the "helpless damsel in distress awaiting rescue, or the 'prize' for completing game tasks" (Bryce & Rutter, 2003: 6). Beyond the general positioning of female character as submissive, there is also a tendency for their visual representations to be hypersexualised, 'with an emphasis on their virtual breasts and buttocks' (Jansz et al., 2010: 237; also Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002). Female characters tend, therefore, to be designed in ways that satisfy the demands of a mostly male player base: they reproduce gender distinctions *within* the gamespace. Important, however, is the need to decouple the character from the player, as the emphasis on stereotypically female traits and characteristics has been empirically proven to not necessarily be a barrier to participation, or even appeal (Braithwaite, 2013; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Gray et al., 2018; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, et al., 2008). A case in point is Mikula's (2003) work on the political valency of Lara Croft, which shows how, depending on player base, she can be conceived as either a feminist icon, a sexual fantasy, or both.

Research into the female as player shows more of a sense of progression. Over a decade ago, Jenson and de Castell (2010: 51) identified three problems that had stymied research into gender and gaming. One was the 'general refusal to consider gender at all' and, when it was considered, tended to be conflated with sex. Two was the "persistent attempt to identify sex-specific 'patterns' of play and play preferences 'characteristic' of girls and women" (ibid.), the aim being to address criticisms of gender inequ(*al*)ity being levied at the industry. This work contributed to the girl game movement, and revealed, for example, how female players tend to prefer exploratory over competitive or aggressive play (Schott & Horrell, 2000; Consalvo, 2012); games that have a problem-solving element, or which are otherwise less "skill-based" (Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006); and games that foster social interactions between players and characters (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006). Three was the assumption that "'gender' is an issue in research studies only long enough to dismiss it as a significant variable" (Jenson and de Castell, 2010: 51); itself a reflection of the quantitative methodological bias that has long defined the discourse. Since then, critical interrogation of the sex/gender distinction has foregrounded more generative understandings of gender as "a category that can bear conflicting, playful differences irreducible to 'male' or 'female'" (Jenson, Taylor, de Castell, & Dilouya, 2015: 866) by calling into question the assumptions that underpin the titles and genres that might define the girl game movement (Royse et al., 2007). For example, Martey, Stromer-Galley, Banks, Wu, and Consalvo (2014) advance the idea of the "strategic female" to consider the ways in which female traits are reproduced, enhanced or subverted by *both* male and female players online.

2.3. Victim-activist

This final lens considers the ways in which female players have become both victims of masculine gaming culture, but also activists in seeking the *right* to the gamespace. In many respects, these consequences reveal not just the toxicity of online gamespaces, but also the masculine vulnerability from which toxicity stems. In recent years, various events – Gamergate being one – have brought to the public's attention the 'pattern of misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position' (Consalvo, 2012: 1). These (re)assertions have fuelled widespread criticisms of the psychological consequences of gaming culture, and how it might translate into real-life violence and aggression towards others (Bryce & Rutter, 2003). Within and beyond the gamespace, it is often females that are the victims of aggression. Within massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) communities, for example, female players who 'publically identify themselves as women through voice or text chat often face harassment for encroaching on a perceived male space' (Bergstrom, 2019: 847), with Behnke (2012) exploring specifically how female gamers join women-only guilds to create a safe space from which they can manage the "hardcore masculinist rhetoric" that pervades *World of Warcraft*. Elsewhere, Gray (2012, 2018) and Kennedy (2011) both consider the cyclical relationship between gender-based harassment, retreat, the consolidation of community, and then new forms of harassment within online gaming communities. To this point, Clark-Parsons (2017: 2125) argues that the ideas of online "safe spaces" for gamers is 'overused but undertheorized' and that further research is needed to understand the 'relational work required to construct and maintain [their] material and symbolic boundaries'.

As we can see, the resistant power of female agency works through these gamespaces, which are now defined as much by activism as victimisation. Beyond the creation of women-only guilds and safe spaces, female players have also been shown to develop avoidance and coping strategies that 'train female players to deal with the realities of playing under these prevalent pressures' (Richard & Gray, 2018: 130). Whilst these responses reveal the unlikeliness that the "pressures" of online gamespaces will recede, other measures have been taken to combat male toxicity in the public domain. For example, fatuglyorslutty.com, is a women-run website that invites female gamers to submit evidence of the abuse that they have received from gaming communities, the aim being to satirise the fact that the (male) perpetrators tend to reproduce the same insults again and again. Arguably more important for the realisation of more just online gaming communities is the work of Henderson (1990) and her collaborators (Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Henderson & Hickerson, 2007; Henderson, Hodges, & Kivel, 2002), which draws attention to the intersectional sensitivities of gendered categories and performativity, and, more recently, to the opportunities for resistance and social justice that a feminist perspective can foreground. Building on this sentiment, Consalvo (2012: 3) has called for 'more documentation

of the extent of those [abusive] activities and analysis of what responses or actions tend to mitigate or eliminate those issues' if an activist agenda is ever to be fully realised. Whilst articulating such an agenda is beyond the scope of this paper, I hope that by identifying areas of expansion and opportunity, and the productive yet unrealised role of geographical scholarship therein, the discourse can be reframed to speak *from* the perspective of feminist relationality.

3. Areas of expansion and opportunity

Feminist scholarship on (online) gaming has come a long way in the past few decades, yet there is room for further expansion. In particular, whilst understandings of the gendered aspects of gaming culture have evolved considerably, the role of technological developments in driving and shaping these understandings have been underplayed. These developments have been rapid and profound. Throughout the 1990s, the home gaming console underwent massive advances in processing power. Even more impactful, however, was the 'revolutionary development' of the Internet as a 'gaming forum' (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003: 81) from the early 2000s until the present day. Whilst the internet is now a pervasive, and often taken-for-granted aspect of gaming culture, equally revolutionary has been the proliferation of the ways in which the internet can be accessed and leveraged for gaming purposes. Starting with the PC, then extending to the console and smart phone, online games are no longer a distinct leisure activity, but are embedded within the rhythms of everyday life in complex and relationally nuanced ways. The "online" of online games is, therefore, a more capacious signifier than has hitherto been recognised. It gives players a degree of freedom to move into, within, and out of the gamespace as they wish, to create their own goals and narratives, and to engage in competitive or collaborative acts with other entities that constitute the wider techno-social *assemblage* of online games. These observations pave the way for more expansive feminist discourse that treats the digital mediations of online games as equal to the actual games themselves. With these ideas in mind, the subsections that follow identify three areas of expansion and opportunity. They are: the intersectionality of players, the fluidity of online gamespaces, and the subsequent need to redefine "gaming".

3.1. Intersectionality

An emergent trend in feminist media studies is to address the lacuna that has emerged from research focussing almost exclusively on gender in distinct or unitary terms. As Jenson and de Castell (2010: 52) argued over ten years ago, 'nothing much that is new can be learned either about gender or about games and simulations, as through persistently descriptive accounts of girls/women and gaming, familiar gender assumptions and truisms are reaffirmed'. This first area of expansion, then, is a reiteration of recent calls to treat gender as a relational form of identification that cannot be understood outside of wider structures of power that also speak to a player's race, sexuality, class and more. In other words, we cannot learn much about how gender intersects with gaming cultures by focussing on female players alone; instead there is a need to situate gender within other vectors of (dis)empowerment. Notable efforts are already being made to close the gap. For example, it has been noted that people of colour, queer and dis/abled gamers have all experienced hitherto 'differential treatment', which 'appears to have a symbiotic relationship with the exclusion of marginalized players' (Richard & Gray, 2018: 113). Beyond exclusion, online games have also been shown to provide spaces of exploration for minorities, who are able to 'navigate their racialized, gendered, and sexual identities and create a community that sustains them' (Gray, 2018: 282). Ongoing and sustained effort to better situate gender within spatial assemblages of marginalisation and injustice is, however, needed.

3.2. Fluidity

The decoupling of games from the fixity of the console or PC warrants a categorical rethink of what "online gaming" actually means, and how the "gamespace" has expanded beyond the screen. Indeed, the gamespace can no longer be though of just as what occurs on the screen, but includes a range of situational and contextual contingencies as well. Moreover, just as online spaces merge into offline spaces, so too do online gamespaces merge into online *non*-gamespaces, foregrounding the gamification of everyday life. For many years now, researchers have called for expansions along these lines, but limited progress has been made. For example, Bryce and Rutter (2003: 7) observed that the 'fail [ure] to engage with the real and specific experience of consuming a game text, its social context and the way it is intertwined with other everyday practices' is a 'fundamental issue' that must be addressed. A decade later, Braithwaite (2013: 707) signalled for more explicit engagement with the idea that 'games are far from separate spaces, but rather are firmly embedded within everyday ideologies of gender, power and privilege'. How these "everyday ideologies" creep into, are rejected from, or are otherwise reconfigured through gaming practices (broadly conceived) remains a central question for feminist scholarship on online gaming. The danger, as Shaw (2015: 2; see also Shaw, 2010) observes, is that 'treating gaming as an isolated realm' can cause misogyny to become a 'spectacle at the same time it normalizes the oppressive behavior within mainstream gamer cultures'. Embracing the fluidity of online gamespaces can, however, sensitise research to how "the digital" is implicated in the reproduction of gendered subjects that are rooted in, but which also transcend, the gamespace.

3.3. Redefinition

Expansion along the lines of intersectionality and fluidity will necessitate the redefinition of what "gaming" can mean, and how it might relate to practices understood as "non-gaming". To date, research has focussed overwhelmingly on MMORPGs as the defining genre of online games. The focus is warranted. It is an inclusive genre that encapsulates many subgenres of online games that are often 'experienced as part of the everyday, such that feminists and feminism are treated as threats to these virtual spaces' (Braithwaite, 2013: 703). However, MMORPGs should not bias the discourse. Expansion is needed to other genres of game, as is a more deliberate exposition of the subgenres of MMORPG. The point is to elucidate how each might push understandings of online gaming deeper into the MMORPG as category, and broader into other categories that highlight the extent to which "videogame' refers less to a single, identifiable object and more to a plethora of technologies, genres and materialities' (Ash & Gallacher, 2011: 352). Taking this idea further, there is need for an ontological redefinition of the "game" as a representational frame. Currently, the game connotes a masculinist space that female players must, almost by default, fight for recognition and acceptance within. A feminist perspective must do more to *re*frame the game by thinking through how online gaming can refer to a much wider range on online activities that go beyond a distinct game that is played online. Indeed, the gamification of everyday life has caused digitally mediated activities like shopping, mobility, and even dating to become game-*like* in their engagements. These reframings provide the starting point from which a less predetermined epistemology of online gaming can be forged.

4. Bringing geography in

Much like the feminist engagements with online gaming outlined above, geographers' engagements with the digital have, until relatively recently, been incremental, and lacking an overarching agenda. This changed a few years ago, in response to Ash et al.'s (2018: 26) criticism that the 'turn to the digital in geography has, to a large degree, been thoroughly internalized and taken for granted', and has since witnessed

coherent attempts to move beyond the dominant disciplinary foci of critical GIS and critical data studies. Within these broader disciplinary shifts, geographical engagements with videogames and gaming culture have been sporadic. This is despite Ash and Gallacher's (2011: 351; see also Shaw and Warf, 2009) call, made over a decade ago, that 'athough there is a burgeoning body of scholarship that deals with videogames in new media and games studies, human geography is only just beginning to offer its own take on the medium and the practices associated with it'. Whilst this sentiment continues to ring true in a general sense, significant developments have been made in understanding the spatio-temporal sensitivities (Ash, 2009, 2012a; Woods, 2020) and affective resonances (Ash, 2010, 2012b, 2013; Shaw & Warf, 2009) of videogames. These developments draw attention to the spatial contexts and embodied nuances of gameplay, but they do not explicitly engage with the ways in which power is reproduced through the gendering of spaces and bodies therein. It is timely, then, to bring these developments into direct and constructive conversation with an even more recent shift towards embracing a feminist approach to digital geographies scholarship, and the social reproduction of power, difference and relationality in and through the digital domain.

Recent review articles (Elwood, 2020) and special issues (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018) have helped to build a bridge between feminist and digital geographies, and offer windows through which a feminist approach to online gaming can be advanced. In particular, the embrace of the diverse, and non-differentiated, nature of spaces that are occupied across online and offline environments by feminist digital geographers provides an epistemological standpoint from which the fluidity, and resistant *potential*, of online gamespaces can be explored. Feminist geographers have also called for digital intersectionalities to take a theoretical turn by integrating ideas from queer and critical race theory, postcolonial feminism, and black and queer code studies in order to 'give voice to longstanding silences' and thus advance a more 'political and ethical digital geographic scholarship and praxis' that is recentred on the 'digital subject' (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018: 629). Offering a more integrative understanding of these two areas of contribution, Cockayne and Richardson (2017: 1642; after Kitchin and Dodge, 2011) draw attention to how digital geographies might be "queered" by emphasising the ways in which code/space might lead to the '(re)establishment of new and old lines between the public and the private' – an insight that speaks directly to the radical effects of pervasive mobile gaming, for instance, on gender normativities and performances. Looking beyond such parallels, so too can feminist digital geographies offer more radical opportunities for conceptual breakthrough. Building on the premise of feminist relationality, Elwood (2020: 3, original emphasis) highlights the fact that.

> ontogenetic theorizations of the digital hold that what is catalyzed by digital systems always exceeds the digital systems themselves… That is, digital objects, praxes and ways of knowing always contain possibilities for unanticipated forms of agency, subjectivity, or socio-spatial relations. These formulations are central to feminist relational ontologies that treat space as a dynamic constellation of material relations, structural processes, ideologies, and bodily relations that structure the possibilities for knowing and doing in particular space-times – *but do so in ontologically open ways*.

This sense of ontological openness foregrounds an approach to online gaming that interprets its 'objects, praxes, logics, and representations as constitutive of sociospatial relations, but not in deterministic ways' (Elwood, 2020: 3; after Leszczynski, 2015; Rose, 2017; Ash et al., 2018). The rejection of determinism, coupled with the relative lack of engagement with online gaming so far, provides a potent standpoint from which the discourse can be transformed in ways that unsettle and provoke the masculinist epistemologies from which it has emerged. Whilst this provides the conceptual bedrock from which feminist geographies of online gaming can evolve, there is also a need to identify ways in which these ideas might be advanced.

5. Towards feminist geographies of online gaming

Understanding the place of female players in online gaming has evolved significantly in recent years, yet these understandings need to be continually developed as a productive counterpoint to normative, masculinist understandings. Feminist geographies of online gaming aim to consolidate such a counterpoint. Spaces of online gaming are not determined by the "game" itself – although the game does, of course, play a mediatory role – but by the non-game and non-digital spaces within which players are also implicated. By building out the idea that 'spatiality must be understood as always-already digitally mediated' (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018: 634; after Leszczynski, 2015), a general focus on the relational spatialities of online gaming provides a first step towards realising the counterpoint. Further, when mediation is foregrounded as an emergent, yet ontogenetic, property of *all* online spaces, we can begin to appreciate how a feminist spatial perspective starts from the epistemologically open premise of contingency, not predetermination. If we take online games to expose a more fundamental reorganisation of thought and action, and to form part of broader social shifts in response to technocracy (after Thrift, 2003, 2004), then we can begin to appreciate the wide(r)-ranging effects that a feminist perspective can yield. Four subsections outline directions along which such reorganisation might unfold.

5.1. Aesthetic-affective spaces of the "virtually real"

The appeal of videogames is too often taken for granted. This is especially true for online games, where it is likely that players might encounter harassment (if identified as female), and/or have to complete a series of mundane and time-consuming tasks (known as "grinding" – see below) in order to progress through the gamespace. Indeed, whilst the "multiple pleasures" (Taylor, 2003) that players derive from online gaming have typically been understood in terms of social interaction, mastery of skills, status within the game and team participation, there are many other motivating forces that intersect with the desire to, and practice of, play. Research needs to fully explore the aesthetic attractions of video games, and how these attractions can generate an affective pull over players, thus shaping the ways in which they engage with game content and other players. Moreover, whilst we know that many contemporary videogames evoke 'richly rendered and imaginative spaces in which we can channel magic, wield swords and band together to overpower villains threatening the very fabric of the world' (Braithwaite, 2013: 703–704), the extent to which these aesthetic spaces foreground the emergence of more transgressive "affective worlds" (Shaw & Warf, 2009) needs to be explored. Whilst these worlds have often been explored through the masculinist lens of fantasy and hyper-sexuality, a feminist perspective is needed to explore the aesthetic nuances, emotional politics and virtual intimacies that are created at the player-game interface (McLean et al., 2019; Richardson, 2018). Often, these nuances, politics and intimacies are not game-specific, but feed into broader assemblages of player's desires, aspirations and fears. How other, non-gaming media and experiences might shape or trigger the aesthetic-affective spaces of online games can reveal their more expansive, and perhaps less-than-rational, sense of appeal.

These expansions necessitate a reimagination of the aesthetic-affective spaces of online games as indistinct from everyday life. They are not "virtual" or other, but, through their cross-referencing and positioning within these assemblage of appeal, become "virtually real". By exploring the virtually real spaces that are created and owned by players, we can begin to appreciate the ways in which 'digital subjects – cyborgs – do not passively gaze from a disembodied vantage point, but produce knowledges through bearing witness from a situated subject positionality' (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018: 632; after Haraway, 1991). Interpreting this sentiment in relation to online gaming environments,

there is a need for research to explore how the embodiment of online play might cause the player to become part of the game itself in virtually real ways. How players develop affective relationships with their characters in ways that subvert heteronormative or masculinist appropriations of the gamespace, for example. Or how the aesthetic rendering of new worlds might become a substitute for travel, experiential and personal development or cultural sensitivity in the "real" world. Manifestations of the virtually real like these can reveal the ways in which the digital subject – the cyborg – is 'always being performed into existence, and as such can be performed anew to overspill the limits of socio-digital codes' (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018: 637; see also Cockayne and Richardson, 2017). This is an emancipatory subject position that draws on the intensities of affect that are generated by the body to subvert or overcome perceived positions of harassment, intimidation or marginality. It is, in other words, a position that explores the ways in which every player engages with games on their own terms, and in ways that align with their own aesthetic-affective predispositions.

5.2. Relationality through and beyond the avatar

A defining characteristic of online games is their networked nature, meaning online gamespaces are, by definition, spaces that are brought into being relationally. Online gamespaces bring individuals into contact with other players directly, and indirectly, through the digital mediations of the avatar. This means that online gaming provides many, variegated opportunities for the self to be projected into digital space (Bessiere, Fleming Seay, & Kiesler, 2007; Gee, 2003; Lin, 2008; Taylor, 2003, 2006). There is, then, a sense of intersectional complexity to any encounter in the gamespace that feminist geographies of online gaming must explore. It is through these encounters that identity can be 'disassembled and reassembled' in the forging of the 'postmodern collective and personal self' (Haraway, 1991: 163) that is defined by contradiction, paradox and the inherent subversion of normativities. Yet, whilst existing work has shown how 'females may construct alternative meanings of the themes and content of computer games, identify with masculine characters, or construct their own oppositional or self-contradictory readings of texts' (Bryce & Rutter, 2003: 7; after Gailey, 1993; Yates & Littleton, 1999), missing is a more coherent discourse that explores how gender is leveraged (or "gamified") as "identity experiments" (Griffiths et al., 2003) or practices of "playing with our selves" (Jenson et al., 2015) in response to the relational contingencies of online gamespaces.

These spaces encourage the assertion, disruption and reimagination of gendered ways of being that may or may not be tethered to a player's gender in the real world. The projection of identities – real or imagined – into the gamespace, and the projection of the gamespace back onto the player encapsulates the virtually real nature of online gaming, and provides opportunities for players to learn more about themselves, experiment with, or forge, a new way of being in the world (after Shaw, 2015; Gray, 2018). At the same time, however, it also muddies the idea of what "gendered play" is, or could be. It creates potentially non-binary gamespaces that players must navigate. How these navigations serve to reproduce zones of tension and/or reconciliation between the player-as-avatar, player-as-self and player-as-player (that must engage with other players in and through the gamespace) can reveal the reproduction of gendered (and other) binaries in new ways. What this means for the gendering of online play hints, in turn, at the epistemological possibilities that come from redefining gender norms from a resolutely relational, play-first perspective. This is a perspective that causes gender to be defined in relation to *how* the player engages with the game through play; not as a predetermined (or embodied) construct.

Whilst more deliberate engagement with the leveraging of gender is needed in a general sense, more specific exploration of the broader webs of relations within which players are implicated is also required. There is a need for understandings of player relationality to go beyond 'two fixed points' (Jenson et al., 2015: 866) – whether player-player, player-avatar or avatar-avatar – and to consider instead the assemblage of relations that may inform the ways in which players engage (or not) with the gamespace itself. In a study of the gendered corporeality of expertise in first-person shooter games, for example, Nielsen and Nørgård (2015: 349) show how female players 'rationalize and legitimize the time they spend gaming in terms of the social function involved', with *social* gaming (as distinct from anti-social, or "geeky" gaming) being construed as the "right" way to play. The point here is that relationality extends beyond the gamespace itself, and both draws on, but also shapes and contributes to, non-gaming ethics of engagement with others. In this vein, there is a need to explore, for example, how a feminist ethic of care might (not) translate into the interactive spaces of online games (after Schuurman & Pratt, 2002), or how gendered processes of socialisation might affect the ways in which team-based games are engaged with (after Vella, Klarkowski, Turkay, & Johnson, 2020). Beyond leisure play, there is also a need to understand how these relational processes map onto the professionalisation of play, whether through formal participation in esports (Cullen, 2018), or the forging of alternative gamespaces that see digital subjects gaming the sorts of online encounters that might, for example, lead to professional networking, job interviews, dating or strategic self-representation on social media.

5.3. Labours of play and the purpose of leisure

Whilst gendered distinctions in the understanding of and access to "leisure" time were once believed to contribute to the underrepresentation of women in gaming communities, the pervasiveness of online gaming foregrounds a reimagination of what "leisure" – and its antonym, "labour" – might mean. Fuelling this reimagination is another characteristic of many online games, known as "grinding", which necessitates players accumulating in-game currency in order to progress (Paul, 2018). The mundane, time-intensive nature of grinding calls into question the playfulness, or even *enjoyment*, of online gaming, and is a specific mechanism through which the leisure-labour distinction is problematised. In this vein, Richardson (2018: 244, original emphases) notes how digital technologies 'enact an *extension* of the activities that count as work, together with an *intensification* of working practices, rendering the boundaries of the workplace *emergent*'. The gamespace becomes the workplace, meaning the labours of play can be seen to negate the assumption that gaming is a leisure activity. In itself, this negation provides a uniquely feminist perspective on the transformation of work in an increasingly digitised society, as 'feminist thought challenges essentialist and normative categorizations of 'work" and thus 'provides a critical lens on 'working space' as a theoretical and empirical focus for digital geographies' (Richardson, 2018: 244; after Cameron & Gibson-Graham, 2003). Not only that, but activities like grinding can also cause the gamespace to become a more laboured construct that differentially rewards players based on the extent to which they are *willing* to participate in the labours of play. As much as this dynamic can be interpreted as symptomatic of the neoliberalisation of leisure in general – or of play more specifically – so too does it offer opportunities for the rearticulation of power within the gamespace in ways that go beyond the technical skills that distinguish stronger from weaker players.

These labours of play can, then, be seen to foreground the emergence of new, and subversion of old, gendered divisions of labour and leisure. Given that many MMORPGs encourage players to form or join guilds or clans, there is a need to explore how the "work" of the game is apportioned amongst players in the search for collaborative advantage (after Vella et al., 2020). The performance of gendered subject positions vis-à-vis the playing of ostensibly feminine "roles" in team-based games can provide insight into the limits and scope of gender-defined ideas of what inclusion may, or may not, entail. Classifying players according to gender-based roles – from heroes to healers, for example – can reveal how the gendering of gamespaces – and of players therein – is a fluid construct that is constantly in process, and constantly being negotiated

across games, teams and geographies. Where these roles are performed publicly – in esports, for example – adds yet another dimension to the ways in which players navigate the gendered expectations of labour according to their (dis)embodied selves. In such instances, players are expected to navigate the gendered expectations of audiences, of their teammates, of their characters, and of themselves as well. How these navigations translate into more or less effective labours of play, and also more or less effective gendered divisions of labour within teams, can reveal the need to rethink the negotiations that occur at the gender-labour nexus from a position of contingency.

Arguably more important from a geographical perspective is to explore how the places of labour and leisure activity – and the spaces that they give rise to – are being transformed through online, and especially mobile/pervasive, play. As digital technologies continue to disrupt and "exaggerate the potential inconsistencies between being 'at' work and 'doing' work" (Richardson, 2018: 255) there is a need to explore the extent to which workspaces become blended constructs that merge the domains of work – whether the desk, office or gamespace – with the idea of work *taking place*. Doing so will expose what it means for parallel domains of "work" to become merged, the subsummation of "leisure" therein, and the reimagination of gender roles as a result. Understanding the value attributed to each domain, and the transfer of time and value *between* them, can provide new insight into the motivations and effects of pervasive labouring within and through digitally mediated lives. Taking these ideas further, there is a need to build on growing calls to develop a feminist perspective on debates concerning the digital economy (after Kinsley, 2014; Richardson, 2018), which would involve both the economic realities of daily life, but also the economic logics embedded within the mechanics of online games. Exploring how each come to constitute the other can provide the basis for new ontologies of "the economic" in and through the digitally mediated lives of players.

5.4. Non-gaming spaces and the gaming of space

The fluidity of digital spaces necessitates a reimagination of online gamespaces into their "official" and "unofficial" domains. The "official" domain comprises what are commonly understood to be online games – those that are bought or downloaded, and played in relative distinction to the non-gaming spaces of everyday, digitally mediated, lives. The "unofficial" domain, on the other hand, comprises ostensibly *non*-gaming spaces, and how these spaces might be gamified through playful engagement on the user's own terms. My intention, then, is to look beyond games-as-products – stable, predefined entities that users engage *with* – and to think about gamification as a more pervasive orientation towards the emergent potential that engagement *through* the digital can bring about (after Ash et al., 2018). Both domains draw attention to the '*possibilities* of play and subversion in digital spaces' (McLean et al., 2019: 745, emphasis added) and the emergent politics in which the locations of play 'become slippery, ungrounded, and regrounded' (Tuzcu, 2016: 150). Thus, whilst a feminist perspective might draw attention to how the gaming logics, mechanics and normativities are subverted by players within the official gaming domain, the unofficial domain is, by definition, one that is defined by the subversion of spatial codes. By disrupting the assumed centrality of the (official) "game", we can begin to see the ways in which a feminist perspective might help us to look beyond 'the question of feeling at the center' (Rich, 1994: 212), and to focus instead of understanding 'feminist alternatives of success and failure' (Cullen, 2018: 949) within a gaming context. It is by exploring these non-gaming spaces and the gaming of space through the prisms of the official and unofficial gaming domains that we can begin to appreciate the epistemological extent of what a feminist geography of online gaming might entail.

In more applied terms, a feminist understanding of the official and unofficial domains of gaming will bring about a much more expansive and open-ended discourse of online gaming. In relation to the official domain, research might explore the ways in which players (mis)use or abuse game design, participate in seemingly *il*logical patterns of play, or privilege alternative playing outcomes over their more predefined, masculinist counterparts (Woods, 2021). Exploration along these lines would help to decouple the idea of "play" or "playfulness" from the gamespace itself, and to focus instead on how players engage in selective or agentic ways with game design. Whilst research has sought to 'emphasiz[e] the locationally specific power dynamics, through which sexual differences are brought into being, take shape and hold' (Tuzcu, 2016: 151), there a need to take these differences as the starting point from which locationally specific power dynamics might be *re*articulated as playful acts of subversion. In relation to the unofficial domain, research might explore more fully the idea that digital mediation brings about the gamification of everyday life by considering how spaces, practices and routines thought to be "mundane" are enlivened and made playful through the digital. There is a distinct need to explore the impacts of location-based mobile games on how players engage with public spaces, and other players, in increasingly gamified ways (Woods, 2020; Woods, 2021). In turn, these engagements might bring about a reimagination of public spaces in ways that counter the rationalist gaze of non-gamified experiences (Lin, 2008). Finally, there is a need to explore how women might gamify digital platforms such as professional networking or dating sites (after Koch & Miles, 2020), the aim being to understand the ways in which analogue understandings of gender inequality might be redefined in these arguably more democratic arenas of digital engagement.

6. Conclusions

A fundamental challenge facing scholarship on "the digital" is how it can keep pace with the evolution of the digital domain. This challenge rings true for online games as well, where the universal fact of play finds new practices, meanings and expressions through their digital expressions. My point is that beyond being mediated in some way by the digital, there is nothing predetermined about online gaming: it is open to interpretation. In many respects, the same can be said about the performance of gender therein. The digital can be seen to open gender up, creating new possibilities for the self to be asserted, experimented with and realised in virtually real ways. In this view, the digital is a resolutely social terrain 'where certain truths, fantasies and investments are facilitated and played out' and which therefore 'structure the pleasures of participating in this public' (Kanai, 2019: 6). The importance of online games, however, is that they both motivate engagement through the mechanics of play, but also offer pathways – some incorporated into the game logic, others forged through assertions of player agency – through which the gendered performativity of play can be realised. Recognising these motivations and pathways will help scholarship move beyond the reproduction of 'existing (profoundly unequal) worlds' (Elwood, 2020: 4), and will instead foreground the potential for online gaming as a *method* through which digital spaces can be redefined. In time, we can hope to see feminist geographies of online gaming not just contributing to a more expansive and well-balanced discourse of gaming alone, but to redefining the terms of play in and through the practices of everyday life. These terms should be defined by ontological openness, and the radical possibility for socio-spatial change to be enacted in and through the digital.

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