

OVERT AND INFERENTIAL SEXIST LANGUAGE
IN THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

by

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The video game industry is predominantly male in both its producer and its consumer base, a result of significant barriers preventing women from participating in the industry equally. These barriers include women's lack of involvement in computer science education, a lack of confidence in their abilities, and a general attitude of exclusion within the video game industry. This thesis will use feminist language theory to examine the overt and inferential sexist interactions present in professional and casual settings in the videogame industry, and suggesting that the industry might use feminist language theory to create safer spaces for women's participation.

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Introduction

The video game industry is dominated by men, on screen and off-screen alike – only 4% of video games feature female protagonists (Entertainment Software Association [ESA] 2013), almost 90% of game designers are men, and over 95% of professional programmers are men (Burrows 2013). Despite the perception that player demographics mirror this breakdown, gender divides players nearly equally – women make up 45% of the total user base (ESA 2013). While the number of women playing video games continues to increase over time, the workforce has not substantially changed. A computer science degree is a gateway to many professions in the video game industry, but great barriers prevent women from entering the computer science, including a lack of formal education and a general climate of discrimination. Fewer opportunities exist for women to explore these fields, and this thesis explores how much of that disparity comes from the conscious and unconscious ways people playing or making video games use gendered and sexist language in alienating and discouraging ways.

My thesis analyzes how inferential and overt sexism in the language used in and around the video game industry creates hostile environments, in both casual and professional settings. It further offers ideas about how we might address these two distinctly different types of sexism. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall uses the terms “inferential” and “overt” in his essay “Racist Ideologies and the Media.” Hall addresses the idea of inferential and overt racism, using them to describe two categories of racism that often appear in the media.

By overt racism, I mean those occasions when open and favourable coverage is given to arguments, positions and spokespersons who are in the business of elaborating an openly racist argument or advancing a racist policy or view...By inferential racism I mean those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether 'factual' or 'fictional', which have racist premisses [sic] and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded. (Hall 1981, 273)

This theory applies well to the study of sexism in language and communication, for which intent can divide or make acceptable in a similar way. Inferential and overt displays of sexist and gendered language occur, both during the crucial developmental stages of interest in technology and computer science and once women arrive in the workforce. Following Hall, inferential sexism is often unintentional, while overt sexism is intentional, and analyzing and addressing these two problems within the video game industry require different tactics.

Research has analyzed hostile environments within the video game industry and there is work done on sexist language used in other industries (such as sports), but there is no research that examines the role sexist language plays specifically in the video game field.¹ This thesis seeks to fill in the missing link between these two ideas by applying feminist language theory to the modern video game world.

¹ For further reading, see, "The Gender Gap in Student Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language: Implications for Sport Management Education" by Janet Parks and Mary Ann Robertson and, "Separating the Men from the Girls: The Gendered Language of Televised Sports" by Michael Messner, Margaret Duncan, and Kerry Jensen.

History of Industries

Understanding the climate of the video game industry for women requires an understanding of the general atmosphere in computer science education as well. As a sub-category of computer science fields, the video game industry links intimately to the computer science industry. Computer science degrees are often required for technical careers in video game work (i.e. developers, programmers, etc.) and many who pursue higher education with intent to enter the video game field (outside of design positions) will opt for a computer science or computer information technology degree. Computer science thus is a gateway into the video game industry. While becoming an independent game developer is increasingly common, the technical skills necessary for game design are those learned in computer and information science programs. Game design, programming, and animation are all areas of the video game industry needed to create games (Tramel 2011). Receiving the education necessary for these fields, either individually or in an academic atmosphere requires opportunities and initiation.

Female involvement in the computer science industry peaked in the mid-1980s, when women comprised about one-third of the computer science undergraduate degrees. Since then involvement has decreased, with women making up only about 18% of computer and information science degree (National Center for Women & Information Technology [NCWIT] 2012). Studies have shown that women experience barriers to involvement in the industry, like lack of formal education, lack of opportunities, and lack of confidence in their achievements, which could be contributing to this decline in participation (NCWIT 2012).

Participating in the game world and playing games are paths into the computer science and information technology fields (Margolis and Fisher 2002). With a vast majority of computer science and video game industry jobs going to men, it may be indicative of a greater lack of involvement in video game play by women and girls during their formative years. Until the 1990s, the video game industry focused heavily on marketing to men (Kafai et al. 2008). In the early stages of the video game industry, the number of women in the field was even smaller. Studies showed that women and girls were less interested in technology or video games, with reasons including the presence of violence in video games, the need for spatial abilities to perform well in games, the depiction of females as sexual objects, and a lack of general experience with technology (2008).

By the mid-1990s, video game developers attempted to expand profits and began making games targeting women and girls specifically. “Pink games,” as they were called, focused on relationship building and problem solving, as those were thought to be more interesting to women and girls than their ‘blue’ game counterparts for boys that featured more action, adventure, and violence (Kafai et al. 2008). While some of these games were very successful, this type of targeting has slowly become obsolete for the general audience that includes women and girls. This marketing strategy relied on a false assumption that women would only be interested in games involving stereotypically feminine activities, while men would not be interested in games like *The Sims* that focused on relationships and everyday life.

Online games have further changed the climate of the video game world and gendered interactions within it. Popular game franchises *Call of Duty* and *Halo* have

online communities that are a substantial aspect of the game, but these communities can be very hostile to women. The most played online game in the world is *League of Legends*, a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), and the player base is 92% male (Pereira 2013a). Massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) are another type of online game, relying heavily on world building within the game. MMOs have their origins in the late 1970s and now include games like *EverQuest* (an older but also popular MMO) and the most popular MMO of all time, *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. MMOs are the exceptions to the rule when it comes to player base, with an even spread of male and female users among *WoW's* approximately seven million players (Pereira 2013b).

In 2013, the occupation of “video game designer” was on CNNMoney/PayScale’s top 100 careers with its, “big growth, great pay, and satisfying work.” The estimated median pay for a video game designer was estimated to be somewhere around \$72,000, with salaries ranging into six figures. The 10-year job growth estimate was 27.6% and employees gave rave reviews, noting that designing videogames is a job that has great personal satisfaction. CNN mentions that the jobs are highly competitive, but the industry is constantly growing,

However, while the industry as a whole is expanding, the rate of female participation is not increasing at the same rate. As a multi-billion dollar industry (ESA 2013) that has a substantial female consumer base, we should expect to see more women getting jobs associated with game development so that the industry make-up can more accurately mirror its audience. Women are eager to participate equally, and involving them within this industry will diversify the population of developers and

encourage different content in games. Use of sexist language within the industry is a barrier for women who wish to enter, but applying feminist language theory can generate ways to address these issues.

History of Feminist Language

Feminists began analyzing language in the 1970s. This marked the beginning of the feminist language movement characterized by efforts toward gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language. Many works emerged during this period, including Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* and *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing* by Casey Miller and Kate Swift. These works instigated feminist interest in language. Since then, others have continued to build on the idea of creating more inclusive language practices that eliminate discrimination based on gender. This body of feminist language theory is an important tool to utilize when evaluating the situation in the video game industry. The theory addresses both overt and inferential sexist language by creating gender-neutral alternatives, and focuses on the implications of the language used with an awareness that the video game industry lacks.

This thesis is inspired largely by the work by Casey Miller and Kate Swift in *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing; For writers, editors and speakers* (1988). Their book explores how we use language in sexist ways that are sometimes subtle and other times blatant. They describe alternatives and methods to address this issue of exclusivity inherent in the English language. Miller and Swift address the more subtle sexist language by offering a thesaurus of words to use in place of words that imply gender, such as middleman, man power, and laymen (155). There are also sections that address the generic, go-to pronoun (usually male) and how using the male pronoun by default is not only exclusive, but also incorrect. Miller and Swift offer the extreme example of describing women giving birth in the general sense using "he who gives birth" (15). A similar, modern example would be describing the generic video game

consumer as “he who plays video games,” even though video game consumers are not exclusively male.

The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing also addresses sexist language that may be blatant, but still difficult to recognize. Miller and Swift give an example of a television listing that reads, “Powerful lady attorney and confident young lawyer team up to defend a wealthy contractor accused of murder” (66). Miller and Swift ask if the reader can determine the sex of the ‘confident young lawyer’ and the ‘wealthy contractor.’ They claim that if identifying the sex of the protagonists were important, the listing would read, “Powerful attorney and her young male colleague team up to defend a wealthy businessman accused of murder” (67). This is not only an example of the inherent assumption that the generic gender is male, but it also demonstrates how using gender as a characteristic can diminish important or relevant traits – in this example, adding ‘lady’ to the phrase ‘powerful attorney’ detracts from the talent or prestige the phrase would normally convey. This case of sexist language is more blatant than other instances discussed, but not necessarily intentional on the part of the speaker.

Miller and Swift work on addressing stereotypes and misconceptions in language, and approach the topic in a gracious rather than accusatory way. They are not seeking to blame individuals; they simply want to raise awareness of issues of exclusion. This strategy of straightforward and non-accusatory explanation is effective for educating about and addressing issues with inferential sexism because it allows the reader to learn without judgment.

Feminist language reform that also came out of the same period was the work of Montclair State College’s Rhoda Unger, *Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender*.

Unger was one of the main supporters of distinguishing between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as two different classifiers. She argued that the term referring to strictly physiological aspects of the subject should be ‘sex’, but that ‘sex’ does not describe the nonphysiological, socially and culturally constructed aspects of individuals – those should instead be described as ‘gender’ (1086). This was important because it aided in reducing assumptions based on biological sex when the broad term ‘sex’ was used for many different purposes. It is also influential because she describes the need for a vocabulary with ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as different, correctly defined terms – not just for reducing sexism within language, but because it allows further research to be more accurate and effective (1093). This was a large step forward for the feminist language movement because Unger made the distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ because differentiation would benefit academic and intellectual discourse.

There have been multiple interpretive works aimed at raising awareness about language and the culture around language, but the discussion has evolved to include empirical research as well. A study conducted by Janet Swim, Robyn Mallett, and Charles Stangor looked at how inferential sexist language (or what they term to be “subtle sexism”) could be an indicator of a greater understanding or awareness of sexism (2004). They did two studies that focused on the ‘Modern Sexism Scale,’ which is a tool that assesses the prevalence of sexist thoughts or beliefs (119). Swim, Mallett, and Stangor asked participants questions to determine their placement on the Modern Sexism Scale, measured as ‘belief in Modern Sexism,’ with a high score translating to beliefs that sexism was no longer prevalent or that they subscribed to traditionally sexist beliefs. These ‘Modern Sexism’ beliefs function as a potential indicator of participation

in the use of sexist language, or an indicator that the user would be unable to detect subtle sexist language.

Swim, Mallett, and Stangor found that those who have sexist views are much less likely to detect forms of subtle or inferential sexism in language when presented with sentences to edit, with likelihood of detection decreasing as belief in Modern Sexism increases (121). Their second study examined whether a belief in Modern Sexism was associated with using sexist language and/or not using nonsexist language, and their results suggested that it could be an indicator (125). These two studies examine those who believe in sexist practices and how they interact or interpret sexist language is important in understanding overt and inferential sexism. Both studies examined overt sexism because they were evaluating people who had sexist beliefs and how those beliefs affected their use of language.

Moreover, the two studies were also explorations of inferential sexism in a way, because they examined persons who were reproducing sexist discourse without realizing it. The studies examined an explicit participation in overt sexist language, but also implicit participation in inferential sexist language because the study participants could not identify the sexist nature of the language they evaluated. These findings supported the need and desire for feminist language alternatives in everyday language use.

Feminist Language Alternatives

The feminist language movement has evolved over time from theory to empirical research of solutions to address inferential sexism and to act to eliminate it. Jolane Flanigan of Rocky Mountain College divides the branches of research on

language into two categories. The first was a field study focusing on foreign languages outside the United States, evaluating the way that language and culture interact in different languages and places, in addition to theorizing how teaching on English as a second language could incorporate anti-sexist language practices (2013). The second branch of research involved evaluating “micro-level” reforms, which alter language practices in smaller contexts as opposed to the more ‘macro-level’ focused research in the beginning of the nonsexist language reformation.

In addition to her macro-level feminist language research, Flanigan did a micro-level study on a small community in Virginia called Twin Oaks, where the citizens use the word “co” as a gender-neutral pronoun (2013). *Co* is used as a replacement pronoun if the gender of the subject is unknown, instead of the generic male pronoun that continues to be used. Community members used *co* as a way to speak confidentially about a person of known gender, and it replaced the word ‘man’ in the general sense. A young girl was talking about a boy wearing her cowgirl boots, saying, “If a girl is wearing them, then they’re cowgirl boots.” Her father responded, “If a boy wears them, they can still be cowgirl boots. They’re cow*co* boots” (35). The community still used gendered pronouns as well, strictly in situations where speakers knew the gender of the subject.

What makes the use of *co* meaningful in the historical examples is the set beliefs on which they are premised. The use of *co* when the gender of a person is unknown suggests a belief that it is good to counter androcentrism by altering language practices. Furthermore, rendering gender invisible in contexts ranging from community policy to members’ behaviors suggests a belief that gender is both irrelevant and a salient identity marker that should sometimes be masked. What is valued is equality and the discussion of actions or outcomes of the actions of a person regardless of *co*’s gender. (39)

Flanigan further states that she considers the use of the pronoun *co* a “feminist ‘ideological conduit’ – a linguistic practice through which feminist values are avowed and perpetuated” (39). This statement summarizes a large part of the movement in general – aiming to create language practices that encourage feminist ideals, i.e. giving equal treatment to all. The topic of neutralizing pronouns directly addressed some problems of inferential sexism, as it aids in separating assumptions around gender in speech.

A different approach to the gender pronoun problem involves using “they” as a generic. In *Gender Inclusivity or ‘Grammar Rules OK’*, Anne Pauwels and Joanne Winter of the University of Western Australia argue that this can cause some dilemmas (2008). They describe the usual alternatives that include the use of a new pronoun (as in the case of Twin Oaks “*co*”), a combined pronoun *he or she* (often written *s/he*), *she* used generically, or the singular *they*.

It is the generic use of *she* and the use of the singular *they* which have attracted most criticism on the grounds of breaking established norms of grammar...The generic use of *she* contravenes the gender rule in that it elevates a feminine gender pronoun to the status of generic/epicene pronoun. Singular *they* is seen to violate the rule of number agreement between a singular antecedent and a plural pronoun. (128)

These two issues are necessary to address in the context of nonsexist language, because replacing a generic pronoun that is male with one that is female does not alleviate the problem – it just changes it. Using *she* rather than *he* is no more inclusive, but using *they* presents grammatical issues as well. Pauwels and Winter favor the latter alternative, because evidence suggests that the singular *they* continues to be used as generic pronoun in informal speech (129).

The study conducted by Pauwels and Winter looked at 182 teachers and surveyed their use of generic pronouns, in and out of their classrooms. They also examined how the teachers reacted to students' use of pronouns, either inclusively or exclusively. They found that in both their professional and private lives the teachers often worked to use inclusive language and correct their students' use of exclusive language, calling them "implementers or 'spreaders' of linguistic reform" (138). They found little difference in gender (neither females nor males showed a strong preference for exclusive or inclusive pronouns), and the teachers did not have a preference for gender-inclusive *he or she* over gender-ambiguous *they*. This is another example of micro-level work, but some that is making substantial change by investigating ways to change inferentially sexist or gendered language use.

Generic pronouns can create gender neutrality in language overall, but a generic 'he or she' does not always serve as a suitable generic substitute for the transgender community. 'He or she' refers usually to male or female, and whether the distinction is on sex or gender, a transgender person does not always feel that is an appropriate distinction for their gender or sexual identity. Gender-neutral pronouns have been invented to address the lack of appropriate generic pronouns that do not relate directly to biological sex, such as *ze* or *hir*. Leslie Feinberg, transgender activist, wrote about the necessity of continuing to pursue these pronoun alternatives in order to understand the personal nature of sex and gender in hir book *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (1998). Ze writes that ze does not "hold the view that gender is simply a social construct – one of two languages that we learn by rote from an early age. To me, gender is the poetry each of us makes out of the language we're taught" (10).

Accounting for the variety of gender identities that Feinberg describes moves us beyond the search for gender-neutral pronouns. Sweden has adopted a new word, “hen,” which is in the Swedish National Encyclopedia as an official pronoun alternative to ‘he [*han* in Swedish]’ or ‘she [*hon*],’ that does not specifically identify to male or female (Bahadur 2013). A pronoun that is truly neutral, rather than a pronoun alternative that refers specifically to binary gender options (e.g. ‘he or she’) gives options for those identifying with a gender identity outside of the gender binary.

The introduction of the internet and other technological media has created additional avenues for linguistic evolution, as well as motivation to pursue such change. Feminist language theory applies to this process, and new language media requires inspection through a feminist language lens. The evolving concept of digital identity encourages inspection of how our differences are addressed in communication, and the identity detachment of complete anonymity alters the traditional sense of accountability assumed in the language of more direct media. The progression of the internet and its role in everyday communication calls for an understanding of online interactions and language use.

History of Language Online

Online communication and digital world building has led to many different avenues for self-expression. As mentioned above, the development of MMOs and other online games have revolutionized gaming, creating a more accessible atmosphere (playing from your own home versus playing in the arcade, or being able to play with your friends) as well as allowing people to create unique experiences and identities online. One of the positive things the development of online communities has created is an outlet for people who feel they cannot express themselves fully “IRL” (in real life). Avatars allow people participating in these virtual environments to create virtual extensions of themselves. According to new media scholar Beth Coleman an avatar is, “a computer-generated figure controlled by a person via a computer. It is often a graphical representation of a person with which one can interact in real-time” (2011, 12). According to Coleman, the term avatar encompasses instant messaging, text messaging, voice chat, and other forms of digital communication. She uses the phrase “X-reality” to capture the complexities of experiences that are at once virtual and real (19). For Coleman, our activities online have a place in these merged realities, which are not merely completely separate environments.

According to anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, who specializes in virtual worlds, someone’s online life “could make their actual-world self more ‘real,’ in that it could become closer to what they understood to be their true selfhood, unencumbered by social constraints or the particularities of physical embodiment” (2008, 121). This concept is a central theme within the virtual world created in most online video games. Role playing games like *WoW* are principally about delving into a new, virtual

environment, and the use of avatars and world building that Coleman and Boellstorff describe can enable users to communicate in virtual worlds in ways they may not have been able to in real life.

While the development of an online identity can be a positive experience for many people who find it difficult or anxiety-ridden to interact face to face, interaction with others in online environments can lead to negative experiences. When anonymity is present, studies have shown that aggressive and unfiltered behaviors are more prevalent. In a study by Noam Lapidot-Lefler and Azy Barak called “Effects of anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact on toxic online inhibition,” they claimed that “Anonymity, or the condition of being unknown (nameless) to others, is considered a major determinant of disinhibitive behavior.” They found that,

Online disinhibition is a basic, wide-spread effect, associated with a wide range of behaviors that have been observed among many people engaged in online activities and interactions. Accumulated research shows that disinhibition significantly affects modes of discussion, information-searching behavior, online learning, interpersonal contacts and relationships, and behavior in groups. The toxic aspect of disinhibition has been shown to cause various problematic behaviors in cyberspace, such as flaming and a negative atmosphere. (2012)

‘Flaming’ here is defined as, “the use of hostile expressions toward others in online communication. It typically includes the use of a variety of textual elements, such as aggressive and hostile language, swearing, derogatory names, negative comments, threats, and sexually inappropriate comments” (Dyer et al. 2012). They found that those who were required to maintain eye-contact via webcam with a partner during exercises were much less likely to flame than when there was no webcam present, asserting the idea that accountability is lacking when in an anonymous, virtual space.

Anonymity allows people to separate their identity into two personas if they choose: one online and one in real life, departing from 'X-reality' into two distinct realities. It can lead to aggressive or hostile behavior online that would be unusual for people in real life, or the expression of hostile beliefs and attitudes not usually conveyed face to face. Anonymity is not the only problem with online communication, as computers in general can create a sort of barrier than enables people to act differently than they might in face-to-face contexts. These elements together can create toxic environments for users where hostile and offensive language can be rampant.

The Problem in Video Games

From the anonymity afforded to players of video games to the lack of diversity in the industry, women struggle to find a place they feel welcome or even safe within video games and the video game industry. Language used in and around the production and consumption of video games is often not just offensive, but also openly abusive and intentionally hurtful. This distinction makes this issue important to highlight – it is not a problem that women can ‘get over’ because the language norms endemic in the video game world reach deeper than just the surface. Both inferential and overt displays of sexist language can cause powerful and negative ramifications.

Overtly Sexist Language

The greater problem lies with the hostility of the community of video game players, because the involvement and enjoyment of video games at an early age is such an important pathway into computer science (Margolis and Fisher 2002).

Discouragement during the period of most frequent video game consumption is perhaps the greatest problem facing gender equity in the development industry; video game community members are either unaware or unwilling to change their actions, which perpetuate the unsafe and hostile environments that women face.

These unsavory conditions are characteristic of a toxic and harmful rape culture which is pervasive in the consumer base of video games. I define rape culture as a culture in the video game community that includes frequent and casual references to rape and sexual violence against women. Many in the industry consider the presence of this culture as inferential in the video game community, brushing it aside as a non-issue

because those who are participating are not intentionally diminishing rape or sexual assault. In reality, the disregard of the existence of this rape culture is a demonstration of an overtly sexist language trend.

Fatuglyor Slutty.com is a website where women can post messages they have received through various online gaming platforms that are sexist. Most of the messages involve descriptions of sexual violence, an unsettling and common example of the harassment that has become acceptable or even expected in online gaming communication. The prevalence of this behavior within the online gaming community, mirrored by the continued prevalence of sexual assault offline, causes these virtual messages to threaten and intimidate in real ways.

A similar example of woman hating/shaming, as well as homophobia, is the case of BioWare writer Jennifer Hepler, who deleted her Twitter account in 2012 to escape the harassment she was facing from gamers. BioWare is a Canadian video game development company owned by EA, and they are the creators of a popular game franchise *Dragon Age*. Hepler said in a 2006 interview that she sometimes liked the story in video games better than the combat. After the 2011 release of *Dragon Age II*, people unhappy with the optional gay romance storyline targeted Hepler with hateful harassment, using her as a scapegoat (presumably due to her involvement in the plot and characterization on recent BioWare titles and her comments in the earlier interview). Among the messages she received on Twitter were people calling her an “obese cunt”, a “fat bitch,” a “whore,” a “plague,” and a “cancer” (MacDonald 2012).

The most well publicized case of such abuse involves the backlash experienced by Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian is a feminist media critic and blogger, who started a

Kickstarter campaign (Kickstarter is a fundraising platform) to fund a series of videos about tropes of women in video games. *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* was the title of the video series that Sarkeesian wanted to fund because she was “regularly disappointed in the limited and limiting ways women are represented” (2012c). The initial response to Sarkeesian’s project was overwhelmingly negative. Sarkeesian became the target of a “coordinated online harassment effort waged by various online video game forums vowing to ‘take [her] down’” (2012b). A video she posted on YouTube asking for support for the project received thousands of comments harassing her in hostile ways, with users commenting, “tits or get the fuck out,” “She needs a good dicking, good luck finding it though,” and, “I hope you get cancer” (Sarkeesian 2012a). Despite this backlash, Sarkeesian achieved her original funding goal of \$6,000 in less than 24 hours, and went on to raise more than \$150,000 before the fundraising timeframe was over, largely because of the misogynistic attacks on her Kickstarter campaign. Ben Spurr, an amateur videogame designer created a game called *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian*, which allowed players to punch her in the face. The game was taken down, but the creator’s comments remained:

Anita Sarkeesian has not only scammed thousands of people out of over \$160,000, but also uses the excuse that she is a woman to get away with whatever she damn well pleases. Any form of constructive criticism, even from fellow women, is either ignored or labelled to be sexist against her...She claims to want gender equality in video games, but in reality, she just wants to use the fact that she was born with a vagina to get free money and sympathy from everyone who crosses her path. (Pinchefsky 2012)

There are legitimate critiques of Sarkeesian’s project, like that of Chris Carter of *Destructoid*, a gaming-based blog, who felt that the tropes she chose to focus on were not as negatively charged as she claimed (2012). The issue, however, is not

disagreement with Sarkeesian's mission. Spurr's 'game' normalizes violence against women. Perpetuating images of violence against women reproduces rape culture online, creating hostile environments for women who wish to participate in video game culture.

Occurrences like these are not the only industry barriers caused by displays of overtly sexist language in the workforce, however. Breaking into the video game development industry is extremely difficult for women – there are instances of sexism at all stages of the process, from education to employment. People involved in the industry explicitly documented these experiences in 2012, when a Twitter campaign launched with the hashtag “#1reasonwhy.” “The tag's name is meant to suggest people are listing the #1 reason why there aren't more women making games. The scale and variety of responses obviously make a mockery of the whole ‘#1’ bit” (Plunkett 2012).

Men and women contributed to the #1reasonwhy campaign, tweeting the hashtag with their personal stories. Jane McGonigal, game designer and technology advocate, commented on AAA games (a game classified by a large budget and produced by a large studio, such as Electronic Arts, Inc. or Activision, two very profitable video game developing studios), “#1reasonwhy because there's not enough investment in AAA games about something other than war, cowboys, football, cars. sorry, but it's true” (2012). Other tweets included:

“None of my women developer friends will read comments on interviews they do, because the comments are so brutally nasty. #1reasonwhy” - @charlesrandall

“Because conventions, where designers are celebrated, are unsafe places for me. Really. I've been groped. #1reasonwhy” - @filamena

“Because I'm sexually harassed as a games journalist, and getting it as a games designer compounds the misery. #1reasonwhy” - @lilyorit

“#1reasonwhy Once heard an Art manager say ‘We don’t need any more women, they’re more trouble than they’re worth’ as he viewed applications” - @GabrielleKent

“Because once I’ve been told ‘we don’t need women in order to know what female players want from this industry’ #1reasonwhy” - @RedPill

This selection includes some clear examples of overtly sexist language in the video game workplace, with instances of unwanted sexual contact and comments like, “we don’t need any more women.” This campaign also illustrated the inferential sexism that was common to all those involved, outside of the comments above. Even less openly derisive commentary questioned the validity of women working within this traditionally masculine field.

The #1reasonwhy campaign is just one example of the prevalence of sexist language and discrimination in the video game industry. Much of the sexist language is overt, singling out or sexually harassing women as many of the above tweets illustrate. Whether or not this harassment is openly coupled with violent threats as in Sarkeesian’s case, it is no less hurtful to the target, or to the community as a whole. Any kind or severity of harassment is unacceptable, and allowing it to continue contributes to a hostile climate for women both in play and in the industry.

Inferential Sexist Language

Inferentially sexist language in the video game workforce is probably the more common – but less discussed – scenario. In response to the #1reasonwhy campaign, Twitter user shanna_germain shared a story that demonstrates a type of inferential sexism that could seem less offensive or hurtful, but is no less discouraging to women:

“My looks are often commented on long before the work I’ve done. #1reasonwhy.”

Privileging appearance over performance is the sort of language that reinforces the

‘out-of-place’-ness that women already feel when ninety percent of her coworkers are male. The issues of discrimination and isolation escalate when women’s peers address them in different or (sometimes unintentionally) demeaning ways.

One influential woman in the video game field, Gabrielle Toledano, is the executive vice president and chief talent officer of Electronic Arts, Inc. In January 2013 she wrote an opinion piece for *Forbes* stating that she felt that sexism in the video game industry was exaggerated. She states that there are “three secrets” in the video game world, “1. Women play games – a lot of them. 2. The video game industry wants to hire more women. 3. There aren’t enough to hire...yet” (2013). Toledano believes that women are welcome in the video game industry, but are not taking the leap to get involved. Toledano describes a scenario where the women are at fault for the issues in the industry, which is a dangerous path to travel down. As demonstrated above in the #Ireasonwhy campaign, this is not the case. Instances of sexist language further isolate women who are trying to break through the barriers and enter this industry as Toledano advises in her opinion piece. Her claims are rooted in the idea that sexism in the workplace could be just a ‘preconception’ and that women are in fact entirely welcome. Toledano’s comments declare that a lack of participation from women is the cause of the issue in the video game industry, and these comments further perpetuate the inferential sexism of the field, encouraging language that blames women for the poor treatment they receive. Instead of blaming women, she could have used her position of authority to call attention to the role that developers of the industry play in the use of sexist language.

Another example of this sort of inferential sexism occurred at the 2013 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3). E3 is an annual trade show for the computer and video game industries, with the largest development studios making presentations like Sony, Microsoft and EA. During Microsoft's presentation and demonstration of their new console system, the Xbox One, a male producer and female community manager were playing against each other on stage. The man got a lead on her, and she said, "I can't even block! You're too fast." In response, he said, "Just let it happen, it'll be over soon" (*The Huffington Post* 2013). To that, the audience laughed, but the backlash later was significant – the community felt this string of incidents undermined the idea that women should feel welcome in the video game industry. The thinly veiled rape reference ('just let it happen') was followed by another inappropriately sexual comment (about 'fight sticks'), and the entire situation perpetuated the stereotype that women are not skilled when it comes to playing video games. Devin Faraci of *Badass Digest*, an online media review, wrote, "What makes this a big deal isn't the fact that it happened, but that it's indicative of a larger cancer eating away at the gaming community (and, to be fair, many other geek communities, but it seems most horrible in gaming). This, basically, is what institutionalized misogyny looks like" (2013). Microsoft, to their credit, did apologize, but Faraci highlighted the importance of this situation despite the apology – the worst part was not that it happened, but that it felt normal and acceptable to (most) audience members. There was no outcry against these words until after the convention concluded. This kind of inferential sexism in game industry language is potentially most destructive: it occurs in statements that are not meant to be offensive

and can often initially appear innocuous, but which perpetuate discrimination against women nonetheless.

The language of rape culture is pervasive, in overtly harmful ways such as with Sarkeesian and Hepler, and in dangerously subtle, inferentially sexist ways. The effects force women (just as the term 'rape' implies) out of a world they have the right to participate in, and discourages them from continuing in professional or academic contexts. The culture demands that women tolerate the stress of such language, or quit if this burden is too great. The burden women carry is what evokes the true goal of language reform and nonsexist language movements: the issue at hand is not that those discouraged should strive to overcome it, as Gabrielle Toledano's comments implicitly suggest, but that the burden of sexist language should not exist at all.

Conclusion

The nonsexist language revolution is constantly changing and growing. People of all kinds are working on consciously altering their language practices, with particular attention to pronouns. These efforts must continue to be intentional and direct, because the problems of overt and inferential sexist language cannot change without deliberate actions. As Miller and Swift pointed out in the infancy of this revolution:

As individuals and the media gradually work out the logic involved in each new linguistic quandary, the presence of women in government and business and in the arts and professions becomes more and more apparent. Which is not to say that as women gain positive linguistic visibility they magically gain recognition and respect. But something “magical” does happen whenever people – singly or as a class – begin to sense their potential as fully integrated members of society, and it is this “magic” that using nonsexist language helps to bring about. (Miller and Swift 1988, 3)

This type of awareness could have valuable and substantial effects on the video game industry, if the members of the industry could realize the potential available to a diverse population of respected individuals. As Miller and Swift suggest, a nonsexist language norm in the workplace could have powerful effects on the employees, especially those who were the target of sexist language before a norm was established.

The video game industry needs to be a safer space for women to work, so that women can explore and pursue careers denied them by the language use of others and the environments that language created. In her editorial, Gabrielle Toledano spoke to the need for women in the video game industry, to offer diversity in the workplace that can lead to making even better games. Even though her strategy to get there was misguided, she shares her aspirations of having more women involved in the industry with the women were targets of sexist language within the world of video games. The

‘magic’ that Miller and Swift allude to is something that cannot be achieved until there is specific and intentional change in the language of the industry, and once it is achieved there will be more opportunities for women to explore their potential within the industry as consumers and producers alike.

There will be much resistance to enacting change within the language of the video game industry. One of the principal problems will be abandoning established norms that inferential sexist language has created; instances where sexist language is used when the user is unaware of the implications. The other issue will be addressing how effective accountability is on the group of overt sexist language users, and how to create it. There will be resistance to such change as there has been in many social movements in history, but further research will assist video game companies with how to address these issues.

Afterword

The environments that exist within the video game industry includes overt sexism that comes from many places, such as the inhibition allowed by anonymity, misguided attitudes and anger toward certain feminist issues, and general insensitivity or even distaste toward attitudes different than those of the perpetrators. There is also, however, a portion of this atmosphere created due to a lack of understanding of the inferential sexism present in the language used. In order to generate solutions to these issues in the industry overall, it is important to focus on the foundations that create the different types of sexism.

The solution to inferential sexism is education. Educating those who use inferentially sexist language, men and women both, will allow them to see how what they are saying is hurtful and hinders progressive communication and inclusion. Specifically addressing the language that is offensive and destructive is a large part of that education, because some users of such language can be unaware of the meanings behind seemingly innocuous words they use. A medium similar to *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, but distributed for video game players and developers, could potentially address this topic if accessible and distributable to a wide audience. A short, video game-focused version of such a handbook could have even greater effects on its audience of video game consumers.

The solutions to overt sexism are a more difficult assessment, but a major component for making substantial change is the creation of accountability. Creating a sense of accountability for blatantly and intentionally sexist people is essential; otherwise, they will have no incentive to stop using sexist language. A crucial

component of this accountability is that there must be an important element to the sexist language user – otherwise the measures will be ineffective. For instance, those who harassed Anita Sarkeesian through YouTube and Twitter with faceless, nameless accounts – they had nothing preventing them from doing so, and nothing that created consequences that they cared about.

Enabling a system that connects real life personas with online identities without invading privacy could be effectual in this issue. For example, many websites and applications require authentication through Facebook (a website that requires substantial authentication on its own) in order to access content. If forum-like websites where overt sexism is rampant (reddit.com, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) required a similar authentication, but could maintain public anonymity, there would be a private way to deal with issues of offensive and harassing language. A person could have an anonymous persona with their information personally linked to their Facebook (or a similar authentication system), and if discretions occur they will have enforceable and tangible consequences, because their main/only persona on the website or application would be directly affected.

There are other ways of potentially enacting similar change. The new Xbox One and PlayStation 4 consoles penalize players for swearing online in the *NBA 2K14* sports game, giving them a technical foul in game for cursing picked up by the consoles' voice and motion detection systems. The received a mixed reaction, with many users considering it unnecessary. However, on the stage of enacting small changes, it is an amazing use of technology – game developer 2K said that they created the feature to bring, “both realism to the game, and a more civilized online environment for our

players” (Vogt 2013). Imagine the implications of a system like this that penalized players for using the words “pussy,” “cunt,” or “rape” in online games, creating a no-tolerance policy for trigger words in this harmful discourse. There may be backlash, as there has been to this policy with 2K’s game, but *NBA 2K14* has had no trouble selling copies – with the most popular franchises of video games like *Call of Duty* or *Halo*, a rule like this would not discourage millions of consumers. Similarly, in popular chat-based, online games like *World of Warcraft* or *League of Legends*, there could be immediate gameplay penalties or ramifications for using overtly sexist and offensive language, forcing a kind of un-ignorable accountability on the user.

Some movements are already working on involving women in the video game industry through safe and welcoming spaces. Projects like the Girls Creating Games Program (2005), which is an after school program for middle school girls to help them create video games, are among a plethora of efforts to garner interest for video game development. The Girls Creating Games Program specifically produced findings that challenged the norms previously established in ‘pink games,’ indicating that women can create games – and be interested in games – that are outside of the gender stereotype created by men in the field before them (Denner and Campe 2008).

Change is also happening in the world of academia to involve more women in the computer science industries. Harvey Mudd College is a science and engineering school in Southern California, and president Dr. Maria Klawe has received attention for her efforts with diversifying the gender distribution in the computer science department. In 2006, 10% of Harvey Mudd’s computer science majors were female, but in 2013 that number jumped to 48% due in large part to the work of Dr. Klawe (Taylor 2013). She

reworked the introductory curriculum so that there were no longer any ‘weed out’ classes that discouraged students (especially females) from continuing – instead, there were now sections for students who were just starting in computer science and other sections for students who had more experience in the beginning, until the section could blend when the skill level was more equal. She also has first year students attend a conference for women in computing, with research and classwork revolving around the issues and problems that are most linked to what the female students wish to study. Dr. Klawe has employed skilled female instructors and the male population of the campus has learned to appreciate having a diversity of thinking and thought processes in the classroom (Kaufman 2013). The changes have been a long time in the making, but on the Harvey Mudd campus, they have been extremely effective.

Despite these gains, change will only occur with substantial and intentional actions on the part of the video game industry. Addressing the issues of sexist language in the workplace, in video games, and perpetuated by players is a campaign that must be adopted by all in the industry in order for it to be effective and meaningful in the long run. *World of Warcraft* and *League of Legends* both include language in their “Terms of Use” that address harassment and language that is, “racially, ethnically, or otherwise objectionable.” A step in the right direction could be explicitly stating that the companies will not tolerate sexist language and they will ban users who participate in such language. Even if the journey to creating a perfectly safe space for all users is difficult, all of those players have to click “I accept these terms and conditions.”

‘Fixing’ the video game industry will take multiple steps, and will require a few different aspects of change. One will be implementing institutional change, and the

second (and more difficult) change will have to be in attitude and awareness. Applying the ideas of Stuart Hall again, the term “ideology” is central to the discussion of changing ideas and mindsets. He makes calls attention to the important parts of an ideology, and describes three things that are necessary to understanding the concept.

“First, ideologies do not consist of isolated and separate concepts, but in the articulation of different elements into a distinctive set or chain of meanings...Second, ideological statements are made by individuals: but ideologies are not the product of individual consciousness or intention. Rather we formulate our intentions *within ideology*...We have to ‘speak through’ the ideologies which are active in our society and which provide us with the means of ‘making sense’ of social relations and our place in them...Third, ideologies ‘work’ by constructing for their subjects (individual and collective) positions of identification and knowledge which allow them to ‘utter’ ideological truths as if they were their authentic authors.” (Hall 1981, 271-2)

Hall is saying that ideology is a socially constructed worldview that guides us through the social aspects of life, but we must agree upon and utilize it as a collective before it can be effective. The end goal of change in the video game industry must be altering the ideology of the industry as a whole, resulting in the elimination of both overt and inferential sexism within its language. This will not be possible without substantial and tangible change to address both types of sexist language, and achieving it requires perseverance and consistency in addressing these issues.

Appendix I – Glossary

Call of Duty franchise: *Call of Duty* is a first-person and third-person shooter computer/video game franchise. The series began on the PC, and later expanded to consoles and handhelds. The earlier games in the series are set primarily in World War II, including *Call of Duty*, *Call of Duty 2*, and *Call of Duty 3*. Beginning with *Modern Warfare*, which is set in modern times, the series has shifted focus away from World War II.

EverQuest: *EverQuest* is a 3D fantasy-themed massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) that was released on March 16, 1999. *EverQuest's* development is ongoing, and the nineteenth expansion, *Rain of Fear*, launched November 28, 2012.

First person shooter/FPS: First-person shooter is a video game genre centered on gun and projectile weapon-based combat through a first-person perspective; that is, the player experiences the action through the eyes of the protagonist.

Halo franchise: *Halo* is a multi-billion dollar science fiction first person shooter video game franchise created by Bungie and now managed by 343 Industries and owned by Microsoft Studios. The series centers on an interstellar war between humanity and a theocratic alliance of aliens known as the Covenant.

League of Legends: *League of Legends (LoL)* is a multiplayer online battle arena video game developed and published by Riot Games for Microsoft Windows^[1] and Mac OS X. It is a free-to-play game, supported by micro-transactions.

Life simulation games: Life simulation games (or artificial life games)^[1] is a sub-genre of simulation video games in which the player lives or controls one or more virtual

lifeforms. A life simulation game can revolve around "individuals and relationships, or it could be a simulation of an ecosystem."

Massively multiplayer online game/MMO: A massively multiplayer online game is a multiplayer video game which is capable of supporting large numbers of players simultaneously. By necessity, they are played on the Internet. Many games have at least one persistent world, however others just have large numbers of players competing at once in one form or another without any lasting effect to the world at all.

Massively multiplayer online role-playing game/MMORPG: Massively multiplayer online role-playing game mixes the genres of role-playing video games and massively multiplayer online games, possibly in the form of web browser-based games, in which a very large number of players interact with one another within a virtual world.

Multiplayer online battle arena/MOBA: Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), also known as action real-time strategy (ARTS), is a sub-genre of the real-time strategy (RTS) genre, in which often two teams of players compete with each other in discrete games, with each player controlling a single character through an RTS-style interface. It differs from traditional RTS games in that there is no unit construction and players control just one character.

Real time strategy/RTS: Real-time strategy (RTS) is a sub-genre of strategy video game which does not progress incrementally in turns. In an RTS, as in other wargames, the participants position and maneuver units and structures under their control to secure areas of the map and/or destroy their opponents' assets.

Role-playing game/RPG: Role-playing video games (commonly referred to as role-playing games or RPGs, as well as computer RPGs or CRPGs) are a video game genre

where the player controls the actions of a protagonist (or several adventuring party members) immersed in a fictional world.

The Sims: *The Sims* is a strategic life simulation video game series developed by Maxis and later by The Sims Studio, and published by Electronic Arts. It is one of the most successful video games series of all time.

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