

GAMEPLAY MECHANICS, IDEOLOGY, AND IDENTITY
IN MOBILE AND ONLINE GIRL GAMES

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the ideological functions of gameplay mechanics in five mobile and online girl games. The subjects of close reading in this study are *Tampon Run*, *Wonder City*, *Barbie Fashionistas*, *Style Studio*, and *Central Park Wedding Prep*. First, a review of the literature is presented. Video game studies and ludology, identity in game studies, and performativity and game studies are examined as the central areas of literature from which the thesis draws. The thesis then explores the historical context of the problem, investigating politics and ideology in gaming spaces and considering the activist and educational games *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City*. Finally, the thesis analyzes three traditional girl games: *Barbie Fashionistas*, *Style Studio*, and *Central Park Wedding Prep*. This study argues that activist games rely on limiting mechanics to convey feminist ideologies, while traditional games rely on the perceived mechanics-based empowerment of their players to convey patriarchal ideologies.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The entire world around them has changed. Whether they realize it or not, they're no longer special in that way. Everyone is playing games.
Kate Edwards, executive director of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) (qtd. in Wingfield, 2014)

Over the past few years, there has been increasing public scrutiny of the role that gender plays in video game culture. The most high-profile example of such scrutiny is seen in Anita Sarkeesian's *Feminist Frequency* project, a video series that examines misogynistic depictions of women in, among other media, popular console video games. Sarkeesian's work has elicited years' worth of backlash from anti-feminist segments of the gaming community. The death, rape, and bomb threats that have been leveled at Sarkeesian and public events in which she speaks reached a peak in October of 2014. As the *New York Times* reported, "Bomb threats for her public talks are now routine. [...] Not until Tuesday, though, did Ms. Sarkeesian feel compelled to cancel a speech, planned at Utah State University. The day before, members of the university administration received an email warning that a shooting massacre would be carried out at the event" (Wingfield, 2014). Because state law prevented the university from enforcing a ban on weapons at the event, Sarkeesian cancelled it. This resulted in increased high-profile news coverage of Sarkeesian, her work, and the anti-feminist #GamerGate movement that emerged in opposition to it. Additionally, it increased popular discourse about gender and gaming, focusing not only on the representational politics that *Feminist Frequency* addresses, but

also on the harassment and abuse that women players and critics like Sarkeesian often experience in gaming spaces.

Increased public discourse about issues of gender in gaming reflects larger emerging questions about the role of video games in society. Despite video games' gradual emergence over recent years as a more accepted and developed medium, the public appears to remain centrally concerned with nuances of video games' representational politics and effects on players. Beyond this, there is also increasing concern about the culture that surrounds video games and the ways in which it lends itself to the trolling and harassment of players (particularly, in this case, women players). As a result of these cultural factors, popular video games' mechanics and narratives have much to reveal about the state of the gaming industry and community. How game producers and players perceive gender can be analyzed and understood not only through games in general, but particularly through a game genre that concerns itself centrally with women and girls.

Girl games emerged in the 1990s as a new genre of computer games. As is indicated by their name, they were differentiated from generic games that were made and marketed for boys and men. In one of the formative texts on this topic, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, Cassell and Jenkins write, "The 'girl's games' movement has emerged from an unusual and highly unstable alliance between feminist activists (who want to change the 'gendering' of digital technology) and industry leaders (who want to create a girls' market for their games)" (1998, p. 4). As Cassell and Jenkins note, girl games from their inception have been contradictory and controversial in the context of competing interests.

Despite the many changes that girl games have undergone as a genre (including the emergence of “pink” and “purple” subgenres within the category), they remain a distinct form of gaming with particular shared tropes and evolving characteristics. Girl games remain popular enough that there are a number of websites devoted exclusively to their collection and storage, such as girlgames.com, girlsgogames.com, games2girls.com, girlg.com, and many others. These sites tend to offer the games that are most often characterized as being part of the genre, including dress-up, romance, and workplace games. Additionally, with the development of games in app format, many girl games are now available via the Apple App Store and playable on mobile devices. The continued popularity of girl games, and their general underrepresentation in game studies, makes them rich objects of study.

For academics and activists, the stakes of whether and how girls engage with games are primarily cultural and political rather than economic. Prior academic work that has focused on girl games, and gender in gaming more broadly, has largely concerned itself with the relative lack of engagement with video games by girls as compared to boys. “Games are a rehearsal for adult roles. The social costs of the female population not being engaged early in this digital revolution are high” (Heeter, Egidio, Mishra, Winn, & Winn, 2009, p. 97). I will analyze how the mechanics of girl games affect player autonomy and choice in the game world. Additionally, with this view of games as “rehearsals” for adult life, I will determine through my research how the gameplay mechanics of mobile and online games for girls affect players’ options for identity performance within the games.

I understand ideologies to be systems of belief that shape and help determine the behavior of their respective adherents. This reading aligns with Althusser's (1977) famous definition.

[A]n ideology is a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society. [...] [I]n every society we can posit, in forms which are sometimes very paradoxical, the existence of an economic activity as the base, a political organization and 'ideological' forms (religion, ethics, philosophy, etc.). *So ideology is as such an organic part of every social totality.* [...] Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life. (pp. 231-232)

This interpretation of ideologies reads them as serving essential social and political functions across histories and cultures. Ideologies, though they act on us through what Althusser calls interpellation (1977, p. 48), are also acted on as a result of the fact that we uphold them through our daily actions. We legitimize the role that ideologies play in our lives by consciously or unconsciously enforcing them with our behaviors. As a result, ideology is not only present in the production of video games, but in how we play them and talk about them. Furthermore, as I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter II, ideology is present not only in the aesthetics and narratives of girl games, but in their most fundamental mechanics.

My research questions include the following: What are the ideological functions of gameplay mechanics in mobile and online girl games? How do these mechanics engage ideologically with the aesthetics and narratives of the games? How do mobile and online girl games reproduce and respond to the tropes and characteristics of the girl game genre? Finally, how do the mechanics of mobile and online girl games affect players' options for identity performance within the games? This work analyzes the gameplay mechanics of five mobile and online girl games. I chose these games based on their

representational value for two subgenres within the category of girl games. I chose *Tampon Run* because it provides an example of an online game that became popular and was subsequently made into a mobile app. I also chose *Tampon Run* because it provides an example of an activist/educational game that received significant news media attention upon its release, an aspect of the game that makes it unique among other games of its subgenre. In order to balance this choice, I selected *Wonder City* as an example of an activist/educational game that received little news media attention, a normal amount for a game of its subgenre. I also chose *Wonder City* because of the pedagogical materials and goals that were associated with its release. I chose *Barbie Fashionistas*, *Style Studio: Fashion Designer*, and *Central Park Wedding Prep* as examples of traditional, dress-up oriented girl games because they each exemplify particular characteristics associated with this subgenre.

In this work, I will particularly be focusing on manifestations of competing feminist and patriarchal ideologies in girl games. I will examine how the two outlier games that I analyze, *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City*, present themselves as competing ideologically with traditional girl games in order to do feminist activist work. Similarly, I will analyze how the traditional girl games that I examine, *Barbie Fashionistas*, *Style Studio: Fashion Designer*, and *Central Park Wedding Prep*, all exist in dialogue with one another and with the ideological and mechanics-based conventions of the genre. Beyond these approaches, I will compare and contrast the girl games that I analyze in order to understand how competing ideologies of gender and game-based agency interact with one another. I will ask whether and how gender-based ideologies (be they feminist or

patriarchal) rely on limiting game mechanics. Furthermore, I will ask what the presence of limiting or broad mechanics means for player agency.

My methodology will be informed by the rhetorical and aesthetic analysis traditionally conducted in the context of film studies. Though I am emphasizing ludology (the study of rules and gameplay mechanics) over narratology (the study of games as film-like narratives), I will be centrally concerned with reading power dynamics into the mechanics of the games under discussion. This means that my research will necessarily involve some analysis of the aesthetics and narratives of the games, but that I will be centrally concerned with the political and cultural implications of the actions that are made possible or impossible for game players. Alcolea-Banegas writes, “As a mixture of visual, auditory, and verbal stimuli, film demands active and complex interpretation and (re)construction” (2009, p. 260). I apply this approach to game studies because game players are actively involved in the interpretation of the worlds that they engage with.

Though my central focus is on mechanics, my research will necessarily have to account for the aesthetics of games as well, since the latter also have influence over games’ ideological frameworks. As Squire writes, “Games are ‘ideological worlds’ in that they instantiate ideas through implicit rule sets and systems (rather than by telling stories). The word *ideological* tries to capture that they are built according to theories of how the world operates (implicitly or explicitly)” (2011, 28-29). By virtue of the fact that they establish the rule systems within which the player must navigate the game world, games are fundamentally ideological. This has been famously argued by Bogost, who refers to the ideology of gameplay mechanics as procedural rhetoric (2007).

There are a number of limitations to my methodological approach. First, though I have attempted to choose games that I believe are representative of two distinct genres (that of the activist or educational game and that of the entertainment-based dress-up game), my selection is necessarily limited. However, this study will not aim for universal application of its analysis. Rather, my goal in conducting close readings of these texts will be to come to an understanding of the nature of gameplay mechanics in a small sampling of girl games. In particular, I aim to provide comparative analyses of games in similar subgenres in order to understand the mechanics-determined options for players that they either do or do not share.

This approach to my topic is justified for a number of reasons. One of my central goals is to contribute to the literature on game studies by providing close readings of games from a genre that is not studied as often as that of, for example, the massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG). While work has been done on girl games as a collective, few scholars have approached the topic as one that justifies close and game-specific readings. The diversity of this genre represents an area that needs to be further explored by academics. Additionally, as I have already argued, girl games and gaming more broadly represent a site of recent political contestation. The questions of whether and how games make it possible for girl players to engage with them or perform identity through them have become increasingly relevant to both feminism and gaming culture. These inquiries will be best undertaken through the application of rhetorical analysis to select girl games as the subjects of a series of close readings.

My work will draw on game studies texts as well as scholarly work on gender and identity. As a result, Chapter II will outline the literature that I use in order to analyze

mobile and online girl games. I will discuss ludology and narratology as competing approaches in the field of game studies, as well as my work's combination of these approaches and my justification for emphasizing mechanics while still acknowledging narrative. I will then discuss some of the literature that has addressed the ways in which various identities manifest in video games. Finally, I will review some of the formative literature on performativity as well as its previous applications to video game studies.

My approach to the historical context of the problem will be centered on popular texts surrounding gender and gaming. Chapter III will review academic literature as well as popular culture and new media texts that have engaged with gaming and gender. In this chapter I will analyze *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City* as outlier girl games that approach the genre with the goal of advancing educational and feminist activist ideologies. I will discuss how the gameplay mechanics of these games represent their dialogue with the girl game genre and the patriarchal ideologies that it is commonly associated with.

Finally, Chapter IV will consist of my analysis of three mainstream girl games, *Barbie Fashionistas*, *Style Studio: Fashion Designer*, and *Central Park Wedding Prep*. I will compare the mechanics, aesthetics, and narratives of all five of the girl games in order to understand what their ideological functions are, particularly in relation to gender and player autonomy. Additionally, I will examine the contradictions inherent in the relationship between gendered ideology and the amount of freedom given to players based on gameplay mechanics.

This thesis will analyze mobile and online girl games and interpret them as being emblematic of a larger political and cultural struggle that is happening around gender and

gaming. As Edwards' (2014) statement makes clear, gaming communities are in the process of engaging with fiercely contentious questions about whether and how video game culture is changing to be more inclusive of women and girl gamers. As a result, the mechanics and narratives represented by girl games are increasingly important to an understanding of how gender-based ideologies manifest in gaming culture.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Three central theoretical approaches and areas of literature inform my work. I will begin by reviewing formative video game studies texts as well as the development of ludology as one of the central approaches to the study of video games (Juul, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2011). I will then review the work of scholars who have examined issues of identity in the context of video games. Finally, I will provide an overview of the development of the notion of performativity and its prior applications to video game studies.

Video Game Studies and Ludology

My work primarily draws on the video game studies literature that describes and emphasizes ludology, the theoretical approach that analyzes games through their mechanics. Ludology is generally contrasted with narratology, an approach in the vein of film and literature studies, which places greater emphasis on game narratives and aesthetics. Though I will be centrally drawing on ludology for my analysis, it will also be informed by some narratological approaches.

The nature of video games makes them cultural objects through which particular types of ideological work can happen, and this work is distinct from that which is enacted through other forms of media. Video games are both interactive and limited, in that they provide their players with seemingly limitless possibilities while in reality exerting strict structural control over their actions. As Mayra writes,

In a fundamental sense, playing *is* a form of understanding. We can decode messages that carry information in unconventional forms by simple trial-and-error behaviours, as the feedback we derive from our interaction tells us whether we have understood each other or not. And in many cases it is even not so crucial that we are receiving and decoding messages exactly as they were originally intended; playing is fundamentally a form of *contact by interaction*, and while playing, it is most important that we keep the interplay going, and derive its predictable or surprising outcomes. (2008, p. 14)

This understanding of the way that gameplay works highlights the nuances that video games can introduce to our understanding of communication. More critically to this work, Mayra's (2008) reading identifies the ways in which players' engagements with games are communicative and ideological. As we play, we are introduced to (and subsequently respond to) the ideological values represented by the game's mechanics.

These engagements are often specifically determined by rule systems as central parts of the game's larger mechanics-based structure. Suits writes, "To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, and where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity" (qtd. in Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2008, p. 32-33). This interpretation emphasizes the unspoken agreement made between the player and the game producer, that the player will be inherently limited by the mechanics of the game, in exchange for which the game will allow the player to reach particular goals. It is because of this dynamic that gameplay mechanics are so important to an understanding of how particular games function ideologically. The rule systems that partially comprise mechanics are what make a game a game. Furthermore, they represent a power exchange that already has particular ideological purposes, such as the maintenance of market capitalism.

However, scholars emphasize that video games also allow for the player to develop a critical relationship with systems of power. Kirkpatrick writes of the socio-political effects of video games, “Viewed in aesthetic terms, play with a video game involves the reconciliation and synthesis of a variety of kinds of rule systems” (2011, p. 228). While this may initially appear to be a means by which players’ acceptance of existing power dynamics can be ensured, it ultimately serves the opposite function. When we are in a state of play we enter a uniquely malleable space. Despite the apparent rigidity of the rules in this space, we are actually given the opportunity to interact critically with the structures that we are given to work with. This is why video games are fundamentally characterized by their allowance of cheat codes, and why they often involve glitches, or mistakes in the design of the game. These openings, be they intentional or unintentional, provide the player with the option of playing outside of the rules established by the game space. This has significant political implications for the effects that we can read into the playing of video games. Kirkpatrick (2011) provides a complex reading of the nature of autonomy in the video game, arguing for its ideologically subversive nature and emphasizing the contradictory relationships that we develop with “rule systems” as we play.

The actions that players are able or unable to take (and the fact that players have actions to take, or that they are players, and not merely spectators) have significant influence over the ideological positioning of video games as art forms and industrial products. Brookey describes this relationship, writing, “In the study of new media generally and video games specifically, the concept of interactivity figures prominently. Although definitions of interactivity vary, where video games are concerned the concept

is commonly used to refer to the game players' agency. [...] Interactivity, then, is not just a means of character control; it is also a way for game players to construct their own environments and narrative spectacles" (2010, pp. 32-33). Ultimately, this argument positions video games as being similar to film, but interactive. Like the diegesis of the film, there are certain givens in a video game that are generally not changeable, such as the setting in which the action takes place.

The question of a player's agency becomes politically relevant in relation to the connection between players and traditional spectators. As Brookey notes, some argue that the player is equivalent to a critical spectator, who is "actively resistant" (2010, p. 34). However, he argues that this equivalence is a fallacy partly because the player is intended to have agency within the game. The presence of gameplay mechanics means that the game naturally controls what the player can and cannot do, providing the player only with that agency which the game makers wish to allow her. In relation to Kirkpatrick's (2011) work, this becomes complicated by aspects of a game like cheat codes or even glitches, the former of which allow the player to make changes or take actions that normally would not be allowed, and the latter of which reveal mistakes in the design of the game. These aspects of the game as well as the presence of players who do intentionally play against game intentions by interacting with games in ways that they are not supposed to (for example, by intentionally playing to lose or to destroy the game world's diegesis), represent a distinct subset of ways in which gameplay mechanics fail to completely submerge the player in desired behavior.

Relevant to Brookey's (2010) reading of video games as media that provide an illusion of choice without following through is Escribano's notion of "gamification" (2012, p. 200). As Escribano writes,

Gamification [...] converts the 'non-productive' efforts of the game into a huge source of energy and a driving force capable of changing the world [...] In this sense, the instructions for the 'gamification of capitalist society' or the instructions for the conversion of the gaming gesture into something 'productive' would imply the insertion of the logic of video games language into common structures which did not incorporate those logics previously. (2012, pp. 200-201)

We can see in this an emphasis on the means by which games and game structures can be used to produce and exploit more labor potential. When work is "gamified," laborers do not know or have to know that they are working, resulting in the greater potential for exploitation of laborers in a capitalist context. An example we might consider would be employers changing the aesthetic format of employees' software labor so that it more closely resembles a video game. Escribano's (2012) analysis provides another way in which the structure of the game naturalizes the illusion of choice for players. In Escribano's reading, the playing of the game itself *as* a game rather than as an acknowledged form of labor, as well as the choices made within the game, ultimately represent equally deceptive ideas.

With a brief review of these works, I have identified the ways in which scholars read ideology and power dynamics into the existence of gameplay mechanics. However, beyond these analyses of the conditions in which we play games, the specifics of gameplay mechanics are central to an understanding of games as art forms. In order to analyze games via their mechanics, it is necessary to complicate our understanding of the larger issue of gameplay. Juul writes, "As it turns out, the formal rules of a game matter greatly to the experience the player will have, but through a complicated process:

Gameplay is the interaction between rules, the game tree, the players pursuing a goal, and the players' personal repertoires and preferences" (2005, pp. 199-200). The manifestation of these outside influences on the game itself reflects the inherently malleable nature of gameplay. The complex interaction that players have with the "rule systems" that Kirkpatrick (2011) describes, and players' intentional subversion of them, are both characteristic of gameplay itself. Kirkpatrick defines gameplay mechanics, which he calls "the game program," as

a, typically very large, collection of conditional statements or binary switches that control the flow of events in the game object as it responds to our actions. If you do something then something else, usually many other things, will happen as a result. In addition to this, the program contains events that occur independently of our actions and are triggered by the computer's clock. (2011, p. 18)

This definition introduces the analysis that has been conducted in a variety of scholarship on video games. Kirkpatrick argues for the need to apply aesthetic theory to the study of games. He particularly emphasizes that games are inherently distinct from traditional communication media by virtue of the fact that they are an experiential "aesthetic form." In making this argument, Kirkpatrick writes that he "sides with ludology in asserting the novelty of the video game as an object of study and the importance of this newness to understanding its distinctive place within contemporary culture" (2011, p. 1).

Manovich's (2001) work on new media represents formative research that has developed and determined a number of approaches to video game studies. Particularly important to video games as new media is Manovich's discussion of the issue of interactivity, a notion that he critiques and complicates, particularly as it has been understood to be characteristic of new media. Manovich writes, "Dynamic, real-time, and interactive, a screen is still a screen. Interactivity, simulation, and telepresence: As was

the case centuries ago, we are still looking at a flat, rectangular surface, existing in the space of our body and acting as a window into another space. We still have not left the era of the screen” (2001, p. 115). For Manovich, gameplay mechanics are largely irrelevant, or at least do not represent a fundamental change of new media. This is because Manovich reads the ongoing mediation of games via screens as primarily being a signal of games’ debt to the older media of film and television. In particular, this critique of conventional readings of interactivity challenges the privileging of software over hardware, ultimately arguing that new media’s reliance on machines that are physically similar to old media represents a more significant facet of new media than the apparent interactivity made possible by the machine’s interior processes.

More importantly, Manovich (2001) argues that the conventional understanding of interactivity undermines interactivity’s ideological functions in favor of its more obvious, physical implications.

When we use the concept of ‘interactive media’ exclusively in relation to computer-based media, there is the danger that we will interpret ‘interaction’ literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object (pressing a button, choosing a link, moving the body), at the expense of psychological interaction. The psychological process of filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall, and identification, which are required for us to comprehend any text or image at all, are mistakenly identified with an objectively existing structure of interactive links. (Manovich, 2001, p. 57)

Manovich critiques the equation of physical with psychological interaction by arguing that the former often undermine or supercede the latter. In the case of games, this argument might view gameplay as representing a series of false choices. Our physical interactions- for example, our clicking on and dragging an avatar- result in our inaccurate identification with psychological interaction. We believe that both types of interaction are ultimately equivalent, which means that we fail to recognize the ways in which non-

obvious types of psychological interaction affect our engagements with new media. As a result, we become preoccupied with the perceived physicality of our engagements with new media without recognizing the psychological characteristics of them. Manovich ultimately argues, “[Interactive computer media] is a new kind of identification appropriate for the information age of cognitive labor. [...] If the cinema viewer, male and female, lusted after and tried to emulate the body of the movie star, the computer user is asked to follow the mental trajectory of the new media designer” (2001, p. 61). Manovich reads this mental trajectory as manifesting in hyperlinks and progressive associations; we might think currently of how one’s browser history affects the online advertisements one sees. However, the mental trajectory he describes manifests to an even greater extent in game space, where designers shape the entire diegesis within which players engage. This becomes most apparent when we consider gameplay mechanics, which, even more so than hyperlinks, actively shape and control the possible actions that can be taken by the player.

Bogost’s (2007) work has been some of the most influential, not only in the development of video game studies, but also in the study of gameplay mechanics. Bogost discusses the ways in which gameplay mechanics serve persuasive and argumentative functions, describing this phenomenon as procedural rhetoric.

Procedurality refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools to conceptual systems like religious faith. *Rhetoric* refers to effective and persuasive expression. Procedural rhetoric, then, is a practice of using processes persuasively. [...] Procedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created. (Bogost, 2007, pp. 2-3)

Bogost's introduction of the notion of procedural rhetoric has allowed academics to analyze the ways in which video games serve ideological functions (here I am referring to my own definition of ideological, rather than Bogost's). Though Bogost focuses primarily on "serious games," emphasizing genres that deal with political, environmental, and economic themes, his argument is equally applicable and perhaps even more important in the context of popular commercial games (2007, p. 54). Where the "serious games" genres, which encompass the anti-War on Terror *September 12* (2003) and the Republican National Committee's *Tax Invaders* (2004), tend to be overt in their rhetorical goals, commercial games may be just as ideologically driven, but are less likely to be perceived by players as having political or cultural functions. In applying Bogost's work to my own research, I focus on his reasoning behind the importance of recognizing procedural rhetoric in video games. He emphasizes that the study of procedural rhetoric makes visible the otherwise unknown ways in which procedural rhetoric has significant ideological effects on players and policies. "We must recognize the persuasive and expressive power of procedurality. Processes influence us. They seed changes in our attitudes, which in turn, and over time, change our culture. [...] the logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become" (Bogost, 2007, p. 340).

My goal is to apply Bogost's (2007) approach to the girl games that I am studying in order to better understand the ideological functions that they serve. In doing so, I extend the application of Bogost's work beyond its primary focus on newsgames and similar genres, in order to argue that his theoretical approach is beneficial to an understanding not only of commercial games, but also to the specific genre of girl games.

My application of Bogost's work to the activist girl games that I study helps me expand the scope of the "serious games" that Bogost discusses, which I believe can and should include political games such as *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City*. These games serve more subtle, but clearly ideologically driven functions.

Galloway's (2006) work provides further arguments in support of a ludological approach to video game studies. In particular, Galloway emphasizes that mechanics are the central defining and driving force of games. The act of playing a game (and subsequently the act of interpreting it) relies fundamentally on the player's engagements with the game's mechanics. "Video games don't attempt to hide informatic control; they flaunt it. [...] To play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to *interpret* a game means to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel 'allegorithm')" (Galloway, 2006, pp. 90-91). Additionally, Galloway defines games by their performative, act-based functions. These are inherent parts of the mechanics that comprise games. Galloway writes, "[G]ames let one *act*. In fact, they require it; video games are actions. [...] the interpretation of gamic actions is the process of understanding what it means to *do* something and mean something else. It is a science of the 'as if'" (2006, pp. 104-105). In this sense, the player's actions not only determine how she engages with the game, but what the game fundamentally is.

Identity in Game Studies

The long academic history of game studies scholars conducting research on gender and race has been primarily characterized by an emphasis on representation. This type of work has emphasized an examination of non-playable characters (NPCs) and the

visual rhetoric employed in the creation of secondary marketing items, such as video games' disc covers, posters, and other merchandise. Though my work focuses more on the ways in which identity manifests through gameplay mechanics, rather than through game narratives and aesthetics, the research that has been done on video games and identity is critically important to this work. It has established a precedent by which we are able to critically examine the role that video games have in representing or reinforcing particular readings of identity, whether they are perceived to be positive or negative.

A good point of introduction for the type of research that has commonly been conducted on gender, race, and gaming is Patridge's (2011) work on games and ethics. Patridge argues that there are ethical dimensions even to our playing of single-player video games, when those games ask us to engage with particular representations in particular ways. She uses the game *Custer's Revenge*, in which the player is "rewarded" for successfully battling a group of Native Americans by watching the avatar rape a Native American woman, as an example of how games have "incorrigible social meanings." "These meanings operate to limit the range of reasonable interpretations of fictionalized representations, so that anyone who has a proper understanding of and is properly sensitive to particular features of the moral landscape will see some video game representations as having an incorrigible social meaning that raises the moral stakes and opens the door to associated character assessments" (Patridge, 2011, p. 307). This argument is central to the justification for studying video game representations, since it posits that such representations, even if they do not result in real-world violence or oppression, still rhetorically reinforce systems of violence and oppression.

Dickerman, Christensen, & Kerl-McClain (2008) provide a classic example of representational identity-based analysis of video games, focusing particularly on gender and race. Their analysis is emblematic of the narrative and aesthetic approach to video game studies that has been used by a number of other scholars from various fields of study.

[T]he hero in a game is traditionally male and often carries a large weapon, usually a sword or gun. The villain of the game is often a human or a monster but is also male in the majority of games. Both the hero and villain are typically large and imposing with prominent musculature, scars, an eye patch, or other defining features of previous violence. The princess or damsel, in contrast, is portrayed as helpless, incapable of violence, and often wearing tightly fitting or otherwise revealing clothing that fails to contain her impossibly proportioned body. (Dickerman, et. al., 2008, p. 22)

In this instance, though gameplay mechanics are implicated (the playable character is the hero, and the villain and princess are NPCs), the analysis focuses exclusively on the characters' representations and the game's visual rhetoric, without giving significant attention to the structure of the game itself. Representational analyses such as that by Dickerman et. al. identified the many ways in which games' visual rhetoric often functions to reinforce racist and misogynistic political narratives. This work has been important to the development of various video game critiques, which have become particularly central to larger conversations around oppression and popular culture over the past several decades.

Another example of how representative analyses have been connected to political critiques can be seen in Barrett's (2006) work on *Grand Theft Auto*. Barrett identifies the racial representations imbued in the game in order to argue that they function to reinforce not only systems of racism, but also larger neoliberal ideologies. "Both in the very structure of the game and within the subtext of *San Andreas*, there is a glamorizing, and

even spectacularization of violence, a marking of young black bodies as disposable, an insistence on a culture of cynicism as well as a particular formation of African-American experience that is extremely problematic” (Barrett, 2006, p. 95). In this work we begin to see the integration of gameplay mechanics along with narrative as objects of study, since Barrett considers aspects of the structure of the game (such as the requirement that the avatar go to the gym on a regular basis) along with aspects of its narrative (such as the racial makeup of the game’s NPCs).

Leonard (2009) has written on the implications of popular gaming rhetoric for the worldviews that it reinforces. He particularly focuses on how the racist ideologies of games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* are further reinforced by the rhetoric that surrounds gaming itself. Leonard argues that it is the fact of *Grand Theft Auto*’s identity as a game that ultimately allows for the racism inherent in its mechanics and narrative. “The opportunity to control virtual gangstas, whether playing, regulating the availability of games, reducing ghetto spaces to ones of play and consumption, or prosecuting those youth who perform virtual gangsta identities in the real-world, reflects the White supremacist orientation of gaming culture” (Leonard, 2009, p. 250). In this sense, the reactionary and celebratory rhetoric that characterizes debates around the moral correctness of video games, particularly those like *Grand Theft Auto*, ultimately shields and allows for the continuation of the racist ideologies that such games often promote.

The widespread war between gamers (players, designers, industry supporters, academics) and the ‘haters’ (politicians, media critics, conservative cultural groups, and the religious right) have successfully erased the racist, patriarchal, heteronormative, and xenophobic representational and textual utterances of the entire series. [...] Likewise, the dialectics between the virtual and the real, whether in discourse (culture of poverty; the racialization of communities of color) or in practice (police brutality; the war on drugs), is further obscured by the

discursive focus on sex, violence, and the efforts to protect the purity and innocence of (some) children. (Leonard, 2009, pp. 267-268)

Barrett (2006) and Leonard's works have been central to the development of academic dialogue on the role that such discourses have in sustaining less overt in-game rhetoric, as well as its often-oppressive functions.

Near's (2013) work analyzes top-selling games rated Teen and Mature for gender representations in their cover art. Near's work is differentiated from that of other scholars by its focus on the relationship between the fiscal success of video games and their gendered representations, rather than only on content analysis (2013, p. 252). Near concludes that the games he studied "tend[ed] to include either no characters or one or more male characters in [their] box art, to place male characters in central positions, to include female characters only in conjunction with male characters, and to depict female characters (when they are present) as sexualized and non-central" (2013, p. 264). This work provides research in support of the notion that there is a correlation between a video game's sales success and its reinforcement of misogynistic imagery associated with box art. The implication of Near's work is that games that young male players are most likely to purchase and play have regressive representational politics. "Because players are very likely to be exposed to a select group of top-selling games, the depictions of women and men in these games may have disproportionate influence" (Near, 2013, p. 264). Near's work provides another example of how scholars have engaged with mainstream console games and their representational (primarily racial and gendered) politics.

Jansz and Martis' (2007) work on race and gender in video games focuses on complicating the notion that games tend to present women characters as being secondary damsels or princesses. Their research focuses on "ascertain[ing] the existence of a so-

called ‘Lara phenomenon,’ that is, the appearance of a tough, and competent female character in a dominant position” (Jansz & Martis, 2007, p. 142). This phenomenon, named after the famous protagonist of the *Tomb Raider* games, Lara Croft, was one that the authors found to be prevalent in a number of contemporary video games. As the authors note, though the female protagonists and characters of the games that they studied are “disproportionately thin [...] with exaggerated female characteristics,” “the Lara phenomenon may be empowering for female gamers. The female characters they are playing may look odd, but they are competent and occupy a powerful position in the virtual world of the video game” (Jansz & Martis, 2007, p. 147). This analysis introduces some of the dichotomies and contradictions inherent in issues of identity (particularly gender) and gaming. They have remained central to debates about the questions of whether and how mainstream video games engage with gender identity, both representationally and through their consumer targeting (or lack thereof) of female players.

Outside of representational analysis, some scholars have also examined the role of identity in the development and playing of video games, particularly in relation to gender. Dickey’s (2006) work examines the rise of women gamers’ presence as well as girl games from an educational perspective. Dickey provides an overview of some of the different readings of girl games and the role of gender in gaming at large, particularly highlighting the controversies that have emerged around girl games. Interestingly, Dickey argues that the elements of girl games that had begun to emerge when she was writing were similar to elements commonly used in educational contexts. “The elements of rich narrative, 3D interactive environments, communication opportunities and interactive

challenges are the very elements that, Taylor (2003) and other researchers argue, foster female interest, and many of these same elements correspond with the types of elements that educators attempt to foster in constructivist learning environments” (Dickey, 2006, p. 791). This argument highlights the ways in which gameplay mechanics can affect the social, political, and ideological functions of games.

Heeter, Egidio, Mishra, Winn, and Winn’s (2009) research emphasizes player engagement and production. This study asked fifth and eighth grade students, segregated by gender, to design a game in groups and then blindly rank each of the games based on select criteria, including which gender(s) the students believed the games were intended for. The authors conclude, “Half of the games in our study were envisioned by all-girl teams, half were drawn by a female artist, and all were produced by a female producer. Yet at least four fifths of male respondents considered every single promo to be gender appropriate for boys [...] and the female respondents had significantly lower perceptions that any of the games were intended for girls” (Heeter, et. al., 2009, p. 96). The authors partially attribute this to the fact that the girl groups decided to design games for both boys and girls (made manifest by the mechanics of their games, which allowed for the player to change the gender of the avatar), whereas “boys designed only for other boys” (Heeter, et. al., 2009, p. 96).

This study is particularly important to the development of feminist readings of gaming because it supports the notion that the gender of designers has measurable effects on the content and mechanics of games. In conjunction with the notion that girls’ access to and playing of games has important developmental implications, this study indicates the influence that gender has over major gaming tropes and genres. “It is apparent from

our study, and other industry and academic research, that boys play more commercial games than girls, and gaming experience influences the type of games they make. It is a closed, self-perpetuating cycle. Men create games that they like, which end up appealing to boys and men. [...] The result is more of the same games” (Heeter, et. al., 2009, p. 97).

Wohn’s (2011) work analyzes the representational content of casual games, which tend to be less time-intensive online games associated with Facebook or other sites, and which are targeted towards more adult demographics than console games. Wohn found that, in contrast to “hardcore” console games, “sex representation in casual games is overwhelmingly female and gender representation is non-stereotypical” (2011, p. 204). Though this finding may be unrelated to the fact that casual games are overwhelmingly more popular with female players, it provides critical insight into a genre similar to that which I will be studying. Online games as a whole have a number of differing characteristics compared to console games, not only in terms of content and sales, but also in terms of player demographics. Particularly when it comes to gendered representations and engagements, Wohn’s work provides an introduction to some of the nuances that characterize nontraditional video games.

This discussion of representational and player-based video game analyses has provided an overview of the identity-based research that typically characterizes video game studies.

Performativity and Game Studies

Feminist readings of the notion of performativity argue that particular acts of speech and bodily movement serve political functions that formulate the notion of

identity. Butler's (1990) work in performativity argues that we engage in performativity on a regular and consistent basis in order to enact our identities, often with ideological purposes or effects.

[A]cts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler, 1990, p. 136)

This argument suggests that bodies enact performativity in order to naturalize phenomena like gender. Rather than allowing us to be aware of the ways in which gender is sometimes socially constructed, performativity presents identity and self as being the natural origins of gender and other social phenomena. Butler concludes, "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (1990, p. 136). Ultimately, Butler's work asserts the role of performance in the physical and verbal manifestations of gendered identity, and identifies the ideological ways in which bodies act as mediators of identity at large.

Butler (1993) views performativity as a series of acts that create and naturalize sex as well as gender. The notion of biological sex is tied up in the notion of gender, the latter of which is a more nuanced idea that allows for the fluid and spectrums nature of the identities encompassed by it. "[P]erformativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse

produces the effects that it names. [...] the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (Butler, 1993, p. xii). Butler’s notion of performativity emphasizes the ongoing practice of producing and reproducing sex as a material embodiment. In this case, performativity functions to enact and legitimize biological sex, a process that Butler calls “materialization” (1993, p. xii). It is through materialization, Butler argues, that subjects come into being.

Butler’s (1993) work focuses on the ways in which our everyday practices and interactions constitute performativity, particularly in relation to gendered identity. However, it has been applied to a number of other fields and areas, including that of video game studies. Video games seem to lend themselves particularly well to a performative reading since they are distinguished from many other media, like film, by their interactive natures. As Barrett writes, “Video games offer narratives that are formative in terms of individual and social understandings of race, youth, and citizenship in the modern, neoliberal, globalized world. They allow players to step into a new identity and ‘perform’ the world from the perspective of an ‘other,’ so the way in which that world, as well as that ‘other’ is constructed is extremely important” (2006, p. 96). Though this argument is primarily applicable to narrative games in which the player has an avatar, rather than many games (particularly computer and mobile ones) that are instead focused on puzzles or abstract problem-solving, it is nevertheless notable that game studies scholars often evoke the concepts of performance and performativity in order to describe players’ engagements with games.

Many arguments in favor of ludology over narratology emphasize the interactive nature of games as being one of the central reasons why these media call for a mechanics-oriented approach. Behrenshausen advocates for establishing “a more nuanced conceptualization of the player-game relationship—one that erodes the sovereignty of the ‘seeing subject’ and reconsiders the practice of playing video games as a powerfully performative one with both intersubjective and interobjective dimensions” (2007, p. 336). This call reflects earlier arguments about the nature of video games and the ways in which we engage with them as players rather than simply spectators, particularly drawing on arguments by Aarseth (2004, qtd. in Behrenshausen, 2007). Evoking performativity in game studies, though it does involve issues of identity that were developed by Butler, focuses less on gender and other individual identities and more on the body as a mediator of ideology and engagement. It is for this reason that Behrenshausen characterizes himself as arguing in support of “situating the study of video game play within the lens of performance studies to foremost account for the practice as a fully embodied, carnal, and fleshy activity” (2007, p. 336). This approach, though it does not focus entirely on the feminist reading of performativity, situates video games as being the site at which we can better understand the relationships among the body, identity, and ideology.

This chapter has reviewed a selection of the literature that is central to my research. Particularly important is an understanding of the theoretical principles that I draw from as well as an understanding of the ways in which they have been applied to video game studies. Chapter III reviews additional literature that is specifically relevant to my analysis of two outlier girl games. The chapter includes my research on these activist and educational games, *Wonder City* and *Tampon Run*.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM

The issue of gaming and gender as a broad topic of interest has a long history not only in academia, but also in the gaming community and popular culture. In order to understand the ways that gaming and gender have been understood in relationship to one another, it is necessary not only to review some of the written discourse that has surrounded this topic, but also the new media texts, including games, that engage with the issue. For this reason the following chapter will analyze some of the academic and popular texts that have discussed gaming and gender in order to provide an explanation of the context in which girl games emerged and continue to exist. In this chapter I will analyze in depth two girl games that are specifically rooted in a concern about the nature of gender in gaming and this genre in particular. My discussion of *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City* will ask how and why these games challenge mainstream conventions of the girl game genre in order to advocate for particular activist and educational ideologies.

Politics and Ideology in Gaming Spaces

A significant amount of the academic work that has been published on video games has consistently emphasized not only the complex relationship between “virtual worlds” and “the real world,” but also the ways in which the latter is imposed on and ingrained in the former. Game spaces are reflective, whether consciously and overtly or unconsciously and inadvertently, of the material world in which they are produced, as well as its ideological and political contexts. As a result, our interpretation of video

games has to account for the ways in which they are informed by particular discourses of their contemporary material worlds.

The issue of ideologies appearing to manifest in game space (though ideologies are always present in such spaces, if not necessarily visibly) is particularly notable in the context of civil rights or of identity. Reynolds (2009) describes a controversy that emerged around a “GLBT-friendly” guild advertised by user Sara Andrews in *World of Warcraft* in 2006. Andrews’ message advertising the guild and characterizing it as “glbt friendly” was given an official warning for the offense of “Harassment—Sexual Orientation” from Blizzard Entertainment, the owner of *World of Warcraft*. This warning represented an attempt by Blizzard to enforce its control over the game space as property. Whether or not Blizzard viewed Andrews’ message as a harassing statement, its warning acted as an attempt to exert control over *World of Warcraft* as Blizzard property. What began as an appeal of the warning by Andrews became a larger debate about the issue, which caught media attention from outside the *World of Warcraft* community and eventually prompted Blizzard to state that it made a “mistake” in flagging the post and giving Andrews a warning. As Reynolds writes, “As the debate moved outside the *World of Warcraft* forums into broader game discussion boards, and out further into spaces such as blogs, general media, and the law, the hold of Blizzard’s primary [Hobbesian property] narrative seemed to diminish and the power of the alternative narrative of civil rights gained popular appeal” (2009, p. 401).

This case provides an example of the ways in which identity, including sexual orientation, is not only present in video games in representative ways, but also informs how game players and producers represent themselves and their ideologies in game

spaces, with varying degrees of material effects. This has implications not only for the game world, but also for our understanding of its political functions and potentialities. Reynolds writes, “Here, the idea of space is starting to be conjoined with narratives of rights. We have gone from the ludic utility of the virtual space to one that has civic connotations. While for many, this is just how the story goes when you have spaces and people, for virtual world publishers, ideas of space that connote the potential of a civic discourse do not necessarily sit well with concepts such as property and control” (2009, p. 402). In this sense, there is often conflict between game players and producers over the ways in which both groups use game spaces for ideological purposes. What Reynolds characterizes as Blizzard’s attempt to reject Andrews’ “civil rights narrative” in favor of its own “primacy of property” narrative might also be read as a clash over the representation of material identities in virtual spaces (2009, p. 401). *World of Warcraft*’s fantasy narrative appears to preclude the ability of players to represent certain of their material and non-material identities, and Andrews’ post can in that sense be interpreted as an attempt to subvert the game’s fantasy in order to use it as a space for LGBT identity-based community building.

Tynes (2007) addresses this tension with his description of the ways in which gaming is often read in popular culture as escapist entertainment. Tynes writes,

[A]ny survey of well-known works of interactive storytelling reveals that most are set in worlds very different from the one we live in, worlds of visionary futurism or fantastical imagination. The imagery communicates the subject matter’s dislocation from the real world. Likewise, they in no way attempt to address modern life or any themes other than, say, good vs. evil or underdog vs. oppressor. They exist in a void of meaning where recreation is king and the only goal is entertainment. (2007, p. 221)

This narrative has largely dominated popular discourse about video games at large. As Tynes notes, it has also been historically characteristic of attitudes toward most new

media, including the novel and film (2007, p. 221). As new media become more integrated in society, and as the types of texts that characterize new media become more diverse, they are more likely to become socially acceptable forms of entertainment to elites. Tynes advocates for more creation of games that are “engagist,” in that they serve activist or educational functions (2007, p. 221). Games like the ones that Tynes imagines are particularly visible in movements like Games for Change, an organization that was created in 2004 with the goal of “facilitat[ing] the creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts” (Games for Change, 2015). The increasing interest in and support of activist and educational games represents a movement within the gaming community towards increasingly open engagements with the question of what the relationship is among games, identity, and ideology.

Frasca (2004) similarly argues in favor of the creation of video games that encourage ideological debate within and among their players. Frasca is particularly interested in the hypothetical ways that simulation games could better represent reality. “Unlike narrative, simulations are a kaleidoscopic form of representation that can provide us with multiple and alternative points of view. By accepting this paradigm, players can realize that there are many possible ways to deal with their personal and social reality” (Frasca, 2004, p. 93). This analysis provides another example of how scholars have identified games as serving political functions. Because of the nature of games, these “texts” are in a unique position to encourage players to rethink the way that they understand systems of power and the material “reality” outside of game space.

It is through this more overtly ideological approach that some game producers have undertaken the goal of effecting political or social change through their work. Two games that I will analyze in detail have activist and educational functions that are significantly unique to the genre of girl games. These games share intentionality in their approaches, as is evidenced not only by the games' mechanics, but also by the dialogue that the gamemakers have conducted about and outside of the games. The ways in which the makers of these games have framed their meanings and functions help determine how the games are situated in relation to larger social and political issues.

Tampon Run

Created in 2014 by New York City high school students Andrea Gonzales and Sophie Houser, *Tampon Run* is a computer game centered on “combat[ing] the stigma” of menstruation. Due to its popularity in computer form, the game was recently made into a mobile app as well. The mobile game's introduction identifies its ideological goals well:

Menstruation. It's totally normal.
And yet, women are taught that it's embarrassing. And crude.
We disagree. So we made a game to combat the stigma.
Our hero is armed with tampons.
Her mission is to rid the world of the menstrual taboo.
It's time to get over it. And the first step is *Tampon Run*.
Instructions: Watch out! If you collide with enemies they will take away your tampons. Use your tampons to defend yourself, but DON'T. RUN. OUT. (Houser, 2015)

This game's introduction clearly demarcates the game space as being one in which particular gendered political work is happening. Additionally, it uses familiar gaming language (around, for example, the hero/enemies dichotomy) to establish the parallels between *Tampon Run* and other games like it. This comparative rhetoric evokes a critique

that was present in the computer game introduction, which argued that while making a game about periods might seem odd, it is not as odd as the normalization of gun violence present in most other video games.

In this sense, using tampons as projectile weapons provides a clear comparison to the use of guns and other weapons in similar games. On the one hand, a “feminine product” replaces an often-phallicized gun, and on the other hand, the tampon as it is associated with periods is normalized and made highly visible within the game. In this sense, *Tampon Run* undermines the conventions of many video games in order to convey its message. The game at various times refers to the boys who steal the hero’s tampons as “enemies,” “shamers,” and “period shamers,” and describes the act of throwing tampons at them as “enlightening” them. The change to this latter language makes sense as a pun in the case of the mobile app, since once the player throws a tampon at an enemy, he turns into a menstrual pad with wings and flies away.

A number of aspects of the mobile game are significantly distinct from the original computer game. The computer game’s introduction at one point states, “Instead of holding a gun, the runner holds tampons, and instead of shooting enemies, the runner throws tampons at them.” Additionally, as I have written, the computer game consciously compares itself to mainstream video games in the next section of the introduction:

“Although the concept of the [*Tampon Run*] video game may be strange, it’s stranger that our society has accepted and normalized guns and violence through video games, yet we still find tampons and menstruation unspeakable” (Gonzales & Houser, 2014). Through a comparison of this original introduction with the new mobile one, it becomes clear that a significant portion of the language has been changed, either for the ease of a shorter

mobile introduction or in order to change the nature of the rhetoric associated with *Tampon Run* to one that is not explicitly anti-gun.

Additional changes to the mobile format make the game more challenging. This was primarily achieved through the introduction of enemies on jetpacks, however the mobile app also appears to have a faster pace and to make jumping over walking enemies more difficult than it was in the computer game. Rather than the enemies making a noise when they are fired at, as was the case in the computer game, the avatar either says “Aww” or “Hey!” when she collides with enemies and they steal her tampons. Finally, there were some stylistic changes to the game’s aesthetics, notably to the avatar. The avatar has a larger head and more details, allowing her to have a mouth where the enemies do not. This was a source of criticism for one reviewer of the app, who wrote, “I don't like the new girl avatar because it looks incongruous with the rest of the animation (which is notably worse). If everything has the blocky animation, it's a style, but if one element doesn't fit, it just looks weird and lazy. I personally really like the 8-bit style, so I wish you would just go back to the old avatar. I like the other updates, though” (“Tampon chucker,” 2015).

The question of the game’s overall style here seems to clash with an attempt by the gamemakers to make the avatar more identifiable or individuated. This particular change and one example of a player’s response to it highlights an interesting facet of the game’s development, namely that it is not viewed by either the gamemakers or by all players as being *only* an ideological tool. The game, known as it is for its retro 8-bit style, has particular aesthetic stakes that influence how it is perceived and enjoyed.

The mechanics of *Tampon Run* allow for two primary choices: jumping and firing tampons. As a result, this game is the most rigidly structured of the games that I will analyze, with the most limiting mechanics. As I have written, *Tampon Run* mimics 8-bit games in both its aesthetic style and in its mechanics, which is why it is so limited in structure. As a result of its 8-bit style, the game does not have a concrete end goal, but simply encourages the player to continue collecting and shooting tampons for as long as she can. However, despite these limitations, there are still a number of different ways that one can play *Tampon Run*, as is evidenced by the mobile app's "Achievements" menu.

The Apple iOS Developer Library defines an achievement as "a quantitative goal that the player can accomplish in your game" (Game Center Programming Guide, 2013). These goals exist outside of the central goals associated with the game, though these goals can also coincide with one another. Notably, the Apple description of achievements also states, "Achievements are a great way to track what a player has done in your game and to give the player more incentive to keep playing your game" (Game Center Programming Guide, 2013). As this statement indicates, achievements in a game app allow for the player to have alternate goals outside of or in conjunction with the game's central goals in order to encourage continued playing. In the case of *Tampon Run*, there are 16 possible achievements with varying levels of reward associated. Easier achievements, like "Menstrual Believer: Started a game" are worth five points, while more difficult ones are worth a greater amount. The greatest amount of points are assigned to "Eye on the Prize: Enlighten 15 enemies without jumping" and "Menstrual Master: Enlighten 15 shamers without letting them steal tampons," both of which are worth 30 points.

These achievements reward the player for approaching the game with alternate goals, even if it means that the player does not beat her high score in the process. Many of the achievements actually reward behaviors that make a high score impossible, as is the case with “Bloated: Finish a game without jumping (5 PTS)” (for which the player can receive a maximum score of 10) and “Heavy Flow: Fire all your tampons at once (5 PTS)” (which impedes the player’s ability to recover enough tampons to continue playing well). Some achievements encourage the player to jump over the enemies instead of firing tampons at them, like “Tampon Obsessed: Collect 4 tampon boxes without enlightening an enemy (5 PTS)” and “The Pink Cap: Collect 8 tampon boxes without enlightening an enemy (20 PTS).” Alternately, some achievements reward firing tampons at as many enemies as possible, including “Taboo Crusher: Enlighten an enemy (5 PTS),” “Ada Lovelace: Enlighten 250 period shamers (10 PTS),” “Marie Curie: Enlighten 500 period shamers (15 PTS),” and “Grace Hooper: Enlighten 750 period shamers (20 PTS).”

The points that the player earns for achievements are distinct from the score she earns in each game and from her high score. Both achievements and high scores can be used to challenge friends, giving the game the potential for a certain degree of sociality. My review of the achievements that are possible in *Tampon Run* has identified some of the ways in which mobile app achievements allow the player to approach the game from alternate perspectives, often playing against the game’s original intentions (as, for example, when the player allows herself to lose early in the game and with a low amount of points in order to win the “Bloated” achievement). That the game encourages this type of playing with achievements seems to open up the possibilities of *Tampon Run*, particularly given the game’s strict mechanics. Because the achievements represent

different levels of difficulty, they also likely represent different levels of enjoyability for players depending on their level of competitiveness.

However, this aspect of *Tampon Run* is only applicable to its mobile app format, and not to the original computer game, which has no possible achievements outside of the main objective (to collect and fire as many tampons as possible, and/or to “survive” for as long as possible, since the loss of all tampons in conjunction with colliding with an enemy results in the game ending). As a result, the gameplay mechanics of the computer game are extremely limiting. The distinction between the mobile app, which includes possible goals, and the computer game, which only includes rules, is evidence of Eskelinen’s (2012) argument about the nature of goals and rules in video games. Eskelinen writes, “Goal-dependent constraints are less absolute than rule-dependent ones because (depending on the game structure and type of goal or goals) the players can also play to a varying degree against goals, pursue objectives other than the implied or explicitly prescribed goals, not orient their actions towards the goal(s) at all, or remain largely passive and inactive in the game without major or immediate consequences or punishments” (2012, p. 276).

This argument is certainly true of the “goals,” or achievements, made possible in the mobile app, since nothing requires the player to play in such a way that she prioritizes the achievements. Where the rules of the game are inescapable (for example, once the player loses all of her tampons and collides with a final enemy, the game ends), the achievements are simply possible and elective goals. Eskelinen’s (2012) distinction between rules and goals allows us to better understand the ways in which *Tampon Run* is stringently controlling of its players’ potential actions. For example, one of the game’s

implicit rules (which is not named but is an inherent part of the game world) is that the player must always be in motion. In some ways, this works to the player's benefit when she is playing with the game's central goal in mind. As a result of the fact that the mechanics force the avatar to always be moving in one direction, towards the enemies and tampon boxes, the player does not have to worry about executing up to three actions at once (such as walking in a particular direction, jumping, and firing a tampon at the same time). However, this aspect of the game makes it impossible for the player to play against the game goals by, for example, standing still or walking away from enemies. This is an example of one of the types of environmental rules that Järvinen describes, which are identified as "rules that define game environment(s): the physical boundaries of components and procedures" (qtd. in Eskelinen, 2012, p. 282).

Additionally, in contrast to the computer game version, the mobile app of *Tampon Run* introduces the extra presence of enemies with jetpacks, who fly at varying heights. These enemies not only make the game itself more challenging, but also make it more difficult for the player to jump over walking enemies instead of throwing tampons at them. This option is still limited in the computer game, since the increasing presence of enemies over time as well as the limited nature of jumping in the game still makes it difficult for the player to avoid throwing tampons. However, once the player is far along enough in the mobile game to reach the jetpack enemies, it becomes virtually impossible for her to avoid firing tampons at enemies while still "surviving" in the game. I do not make this point to argue that avoiding throwing tampons in the game is somehow ethically or mechanically preferable to throwing them (the latter is obviously inaccurate due to the fact that playing the game successfully depends on the player's throwing of

tampons), but to argue that the player is very limited even in her ability to play against the game's intentions by avoiding enacting one of the game's central goals.

In addition, avoiding collecting tampon boxes is equally difficult, since the player only begins the game with ten tampons. If she avoids collecting tampon boxes while playing, she can only survive a maximum of ten opponents (if she shoots each opponent with a tampon) and a minimum of five opponents (if she avoids jumping entirely and allows enemies to collide with her and steal her tampons). Though it is possible to avoid collecting tampons and jump over enemies instead of firing at them, it becomes very difficult to either avoid inadvertently collecting tampons or colliding into too many enemies the longer one tries to play in this way.

In this sense, *Tampon Run* makes it incredibly difficult for a player to attempt to play against the game's intentions. Discounting the additional options encouraged by the mobile app's achievements (which nevertheless tend to fall in one of the following categories), the player is faced with four essential options: she can choose to take no action, which results in her losing the game after colliding with five opponents; she can avoid firing tampons at opponents; she can avoid collecting tampons; or she can play the game in the easiest way possible and in the way that allows her to survive for the greatest amount of time, by both collecting tampons and firing them. This last option is of course how the game is intended to be played.

An important facet of *Tampon Run*'s structure is that the player has no control over the game's diegesis, including the avatar's appearance. As Holohan describes of the avatar and NPCs' appearances, "At first, [Gonzales and Houser] used different colored rectangles to represent the girl and the enemies, simply to see if the game worked. Soon,

the heroine became a blockish girl with brown pigtails and a pink frock and the villains became oafs in pink baseball caps and blue shirts. When the girl hits them with tampons, they cry ‘ooh’” (2014). In the mobile app and in an updated version of the computer game, the avatar’s hair becomes black and is no longer in pigtails, though it has a pink bow in it that matches the avatar’s shirt. The avatar and the walking enemies are both white, while the jetpack enemies have dark skin. The jetpack enemies wear red shirts and orange pants, as well as backwards pink baseball caps that match those of the walking enemies.

Tampon Run’s success as a game and as an object of news media attention is likely partially due to its use of familiar gaming tropes in order to convey a subversive ideological message. The 8-bit style and narrative of a hero shooting at enemies and collecting objects is recognizable even to non-gamers, so that the game’s mechanics and aesthetics draw traditional interest in the same way that the game’s ideological goal of normalizing menstruation draws attention as a novelty. In this way, *Tampon Run* can be characterized as a current event game according to the description of the latter by Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweizer (2010). “Not only are current event games easy to create and distribute, they are also easy to play. And for good reason: they need to appeal both to people who regularly play games for entertainment and to people who don’t. One strategy for drawing in potential players is to borrow tried-and-true game mechanics: match puzzle pieces, avoid falling objects, run and jump, point, shoot, and click. If players already know how to play a game, they might better absorb the news it contains” (Bogost, Ferrari, & Schweizer, 2010, p. 18). According to this analysis, *Tampon Run*’s mechanics act as an outlet for its ideology in a number of different ways, not only by

conveying a particular vision of the gameworld, but also by introducing the player to a feminist message through traditional gameplay.

Wonder City

In a similar fashion, *Wonder City* approaches gender and gaming with a traditional format that allows the game to serve both educational and activist functions. Kristy Guevara-Flanagan and Kelcey Edwards created *Wonder City* as a companion to the PBS-produced documentary *Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines*. According to Guevara-Flanagan and Edwards, “Our hope is that *Wonder City* will undermine these problematic stereotypes and gender limitations by immersing players in a world that represents a more realistic diversity in race, gender, and body image. By empowering tweens to adopt their own superhero identity, they become agents of their own values” (qtd. in Independent Lens, 2013). The game has been characterized in reviews as a “visual novel” and as a “choice game,” since it centers primarily on comic book-like aesthetics presenting a narrative in which the player gets to choose different actions that the avatar can take.

Notably, the creators also describe earlier research that led them to develop the game: “We were first encouraged to create a game at the BAVC Producers’ New Media Institute. Our research found that half of girls ages 8 to 12 play games online. The most popular ‘girl games’ center on themes like cooking, shopping, makeup, and dating, and the default protagonist of most other games is a white male. This lack of representation discourages girls and women from participating in the gaming community—as either consumers or creators” (Guevara-Flanagan & Edwards, qtd. in Independent Lens, 2013).

That this research was the driving force for the development of *Wonder City* highlights the game's activist functions. Additionally, the game comes with suggested lesson plans in the form of a classroom guide for teachers who want to incorporate *Wonder City* and the accompanying documentary into their curricula. This aspect of the game and its peripheral materials makes it clear that the gamemakers envision it as serving educational functions, and therefore provided suggestions for ways that teachers could incorporate the game into their classrooms. For these reasons, *Wonder City* has clear pedagogical and activist functions.

Unlike *Tampon Run*, *Wonder City* not only has detailed images of both the avatar and the NPCs, but also allows the player to choose certain aspects of the avatar's appearance. There are nine total options for the avatar, comprised of three options based on size and three options based on race. Both of these facets of the avatar selection process are relatively unique in a girl game. The only other girl game that I have come across in my research that allows the player to change the avatar's size or weight is *The Sims*, which is known for the fact that it allows players to control and modify virtually every aspect of the avatar's appearance. Additionally, a number of girl games have an automatically white avatar and do not allow the player to change the avatar's race. This is the case, for example, with *Tampon Run*, *Central Park Wedding Prep*, and a number of dress-up and makeover games that are similar to *Central Park Wedding Prep*.

Racial representation in online spaces has been a source of dialogue for several decades. Particularly in the early years during which the internet first came to prominence, the notion of a bodiless location at which users could "disconnect" from

material reality was complex, hailed by some as a political utopia despite the erasure of raced and gendered bodies that it often entailed. As Nguyen writes,

I enact my various identifications—including my Vietnamese-ness—deliberately, scripting these into the hypertext I write. It seems, however, that I have violated some rules regarding my in/visibility. First, in declaring my corporeal politicization, I’ve renounced the popular cybergeek assumption decreeing the obsolescence of (the particularities of) the body. But worse, since I’ve declared myself to be an Asian girl, it is unthinkable that I’m not then a spectacular delicacy, a visual treat [...] Being both embodied and abstract, still (they tell me) I’ve messed up the order. (2001, p. 186)

Nguyen’s (2001) work highlights the contradictions inherent in the way that people of color are expected to exist in digital spaces. On the one hand, bodies of color are erased in the early cyber narrative that celebrates a non-material self, and on the other hand, when bodies of color are made present in digital spaces, this “visibility” is often exploitative or reinforces systems of racism. As a result, Nguyen experienced backlash and vitriol when she made her body “both embodied and abstract” for the purposes of advancing feminist and anti-racist ideologies.

I note this aspect of race and its relationship to online spaces in order to identify the complex ways in which racial visibility has manifested digitally. In the context of girl games, there is an overwhelming normalization of white bodies and absence of bodies of color, particularly in the case of avatars. As Kaiser notes, controversy around both racial and gendered representation has come to the forefront of discourses on a number of different popular media, particularly film. “Video games, however, add an extra layer to this. Since players control the main character, instead of merely observing, the assumption is that players *are* their character. [...] The problem with that logic is that ‘you’ are always a white man in blockbuster games, according to a consistent set of game releases” (Kaiser, 2014). The issue of identity-based representation is particularly

important in the context of girl games because of their target players' young age and impressionability. For these reasons, *Wonder City*'s relative racial and size-based diversity in avatar options (and its racial diversity in NPCs) represents a conscious choice by the gamemakers to expand the availability and representation of different body types to girl gamers. That the avatar is a superhero in the narrative increases the potential for empowerment of the player through positive racial, gendered, and size-based representation.

The gameplay of *Wonder City* centers on roleplaying and decision-making processes. As the player makes decisions, the NPCs will change their behavior towards the avatar based on what she says and does. For example, early in the game the player has the option to decide how the avatar feels about her science teacher. The player has three options: "Science sucks and Ms. Planck is super-strict!", "I love Ms. Planck, even if science isn't my specialty," or "I love Ms. Planck, almost as much as I love science!" The player's choice not only contributes to the avatar's character (which affects which badges or achievements the player gets), but also how Ms. Planck treats the avatar. If the player chooses to dislike Ms. Planck, then that character will frown at the avatar when she appears late to class and say, "Ada, I expect this won't happen again?" However, if the player chooses to like Ms. Planck and science, then Ms. Planck will smile at the avatar despite her tardiness and say, "I was wondering what happened to you, Ada!" In this sense, though the game attempts to remain neutral towards the player's actions (as I will discuss in greater detail), there are still implicit rewards and punishments for particular social behaviors that the player enacts through the avatar. These aspects of the game are mostly subtle, as is the case with the avatar's relationship to Ms. Planck. Unless a player

played the game multiple times and was paying close attention to the different effects of each choice, she likely would not notice the slight changes in effects.

Additionally, the player is denied access to certain choices based on choices that she has made previously. For example, if the player makes the avatar more independent from her friends and other NPCs, at a certain point the avatar no longer has the option of turning to her friends for help. As the game text reads when the player hovers over that particular option (which turns red when it is not available), “You haven’t needed them so far—why now?” These are two examples of the ways in which the game’s mechanics teach the player about interpersonal communication and relationships. However, in some ways the relationships that the game presents are unrealistic due to the fact that they consistently remain relatively positive. This was likely done in order to avoid punishing the player for making nontraditional choices about the avatar’s relationships (namely, for being consistently rude or unkind to the avatar’s friends). For example, even if the player consistently chooses negative reactions to the avatar’s best friend, Cloud (by, for example, insulting a haircut that she gets and siding against her in arguments between Cloud and another NPC), Cloud will still remain a consistent and positive presence throughout the game. Cloud even appears at the game narrative’s climax in order to support the avatar. Even if the player tries to reject her by choosing “It’s really not cool that you’re here, Cloud,” Cloud still insists, “I’m your best friend *forever*, Ada! Especially when you become a superhero and need some backup!”

As this aspect of the game indicates, rather than rewarding traditionally ethical or socially acceptable behaviors, *Wonder City* rewards almost all choices equally. Though in some cases the game text will chastise the player for particular behaviors, this tends more

often to be an exception than a norm. As the player progresses through the game, she sees the different values that her choices have reflected, and all of the values are given positive attributions. These values, if the player maintains them throughout the game, become badges that the player has earned by the time the game concludes. So for example, the player can earn a badge for being “self-protective” in the same way that she can earn one for being “selfless.” The complexity of the choices available to the player reflects a more nuanced approach to issues of morality than is usually presented in children’s texts. The player can even earn a badge called “clobberin’ time” for using the avatar’s superpowers in “direct” (implicitly violent) ways. The contradictory nature of a number of the badges that the player can earn mirrors the achievements that are possible in the mobile version of *Tampon Run*. In this sense, like *Tampon Run*, *Wonder City* encourages players not only to play the game multiple times, but also to try playing it with different goals or values in mind.

There are a number of ways in which these aspects of *Wonder City* highlight its activist and educational origins and functions. In particular, the “self-protective” badge stands out in contrast to the values that are generally associated with traditional girl games. This is made apparent through a brief comparison of *Wonder City* to a popular series of girl games called the *Jennifer Rose* games. The goal of the *Jennifer Rose* games is to balance the avatar’s work with her relationship. Through click-and-drag mechanics, the player uses the avatar to do work, such as waiting tables or babysitting children. When the avatar’s boyfriend comes to visit the workplace, the player uses the avatar to flirt with the boyfriend for a predetermined amount of time. The game, in this sense, centrally focuses on time management and the balance by women of their public and

private lives. In particular, the *Jennifer Rose* games train the player to be very selfless, and they reflect larger social ideologies that emphasize that women should be altruistic caregivers who are good at maintaining interpersonal relationships. The game is likely appealing due to its similarity to more popular click-and-drag games such as *Diner Dash*. Given the values implicit in games like the *Jennifer Rose* series, the fact that *Wonder City* actually rewards the player just as much for being “self-protective” as it does for being “selfless” is quite subversive in a number of ways. The mechanics of this game implicitly challenge the notion that women’s primary responsibility should be to put others before themselves. Additionally, *Wonder City* attempts to undermine women’s socialization in favor of selflessness by rewarding self-protection.

Conclusion

At a time during which there is heightened scrutiny of the relationship between gender and gaming, *Wonder City* and *Tampon Run* use their mechanics to advance feminist and educational ideologies in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. It is particularly important and beneficial to study games like these because they represent some of the independent outliers that provide alternatives to more mainstream girl games. I believe that feminist-identified games and gamemakers will become increasingly important to the business and culture of video games as the gaming community continues to interrogate its relationship to women and gender more broadly. Games like *Wonder City* and *Tampon Run* are in dialogue not only with other girl games and games more broadly, but also with activists, educators, and gamers who have contributed, one way or

another, to contemporary discourse around gender and gaming. Finally, the rules and mechanics of these games highlight well the ways in which game structures are situated as part of larger ideological forces. They show the ways in which mechanics and rule structures have the potential to allow players to reconsider their relationship to systems of power.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

In my analysis of two outlier girl games, I have argued that there is a complex and sometimes-contradictory relationship between gameplay mechanics and their ideological implications. Specifically, though *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City* have highly structured and limiting mechanics, their rule systems nevertheless allow for subversive approaches to gender identity. Though these games have limited representational options in terms of race, they align themselves rhetorically, through both the games' peripheral texts and their procedures, with feminist ideologies.

This seems contradictory because the rhetoric of freedom and autonomy is more commonly associated with feminism than the rhetoric of control. This characterization applies even to feminist discourses around language. For example, Butler writes, "We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing: both 'what' we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences" (1997, p. 8). Traditional discourses of feminism align themselves relatively consistently with autonomous rhetoric that emphasizes the production (of social constructs and material labor alike) by the gendered subject. My analysis of girl games indicates an alternative approach, in which stricter control over the player's potential options represents more feminist ideologies and the presence of a greater number potential options for the player represents more anti-feminist ideologies. This chapter extends this argument in order to analyze the gameplay mechanics of three

traditional girl games. The games that I discuss in this chapter are *Barbie Fashionistas* and *Style Studio*, both mobile apps, and *Central Park Wedding Prep*, an online game.

Barbie Fashionistas

Barbie Fashionistas is a free mobile app produced by Mattel, Inc., the toy manufacturing company that owns Barbie. The game combines traditional dress-up elements with design elements, such that the player can both “dress” a Barbie doll in the pre-existing outfit of her choice, and also “design” original outfits to dress the doll in. Because the game is a mobile app, it uses touch selection to allow the player to choose particular outfit combinations, accessories, shoes, and dolls.

In terms of quantifiable choices, *Barbie Fashionistas* gives its player dozens of options per area of interest (for example, in the cases of pre-existing outfits, accessories, and even dolls). Here I should note that I do not use “avatar” to refer to what the game calls “your Barbie doll,” despite the fact that I will compare the avatars of *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City* to the dolls of *Barbie Fashionistas*. All three of these games have distinct differences in terms of how they view the function of the avatar/doll and in terms of how much control they give the player over the avatar/doll’s appearance. I make the distinction between the avatar and the doll based on the games’ respective discourses of identification.

Tampon Run expects the player to identify with the avatar as an extension of herself because the avatar is the only aspect of the game diegesis that the player controls. Additionally, though the game initially refers to the avatar as a distinct entity (using third person phrases like “our hero” and “her mission”), its instructions eventually refer to the

player *as* the avatar, stating, “Watch out! If you collide with enemies they will take away your tampons. Use your tampons to defend yourself, but DON’T. RUN. OUT.” Similarly, *Wonder City*’s text refers to the player as the avatar from the beginning, providing the expectation of identification. The game’s introduction asks the player, “What kind of hero will you become?” and a section of the concluding screen reads, “Your choices were one path towards heroism! There are many ways to use the Quanta. If you could do it again, would you choose the same?”

Alternately, this rhetoric is never used by *Barbie Fashionistas*, which consistently draws a distinction between the player and the dolls. This rhetoric is enforced through instructions like “Choose your favorite doll!” and “Do you want to go to the Dressing Room and try it on your Barbie® doll?” The function of this rhetoric seems to be to evoke the traditional way of playing with a Barbie doll, in which the player physically dresses a material doll. However, though the game distinguishes consistently between the player and the doll, the player is still intended to identify with the doll in a way that is similar to avatar identification in *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City*. This identification is implied through the game’s evocation of traditional, material Barbie dolls and Barbie playing habits. From their inception to the present, Barbie dolls have functioned as aspirational identifiers for the children who play with them, and particularly for girls.

Barbie dolls’ ultrathin body proportions provide an aspirational role model for very young girls that causes body dissatisfaction. [...] so that exposure to images of Barbie doll leads to detrimental effects, at least when girls are young enough to identify with Barbie doll. As argued in the introduction, developmentally, the influence of Barbie as a sociocultural embodiment of the thin beauty ideal on very young girls’ self-concept and self-evaluation appears to be direct and not yet mediated by internalized cognitive self-concept structures, such as the thinness ideal. (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006, p. 290)

Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive's (2006) study indicates that girls consistently identify with Barbie dolls. Additionally, girls identify with Barbie dolls as aspirational figures whose bodies represent physiologically disproportionate ideals. That girls are intended to identify with Barbie is enforced by Mattel itself, which presents Barbie as being an outlet through which children can explore and determine their own identities. A recent statement by Mattel on its new "Sheroes" line of dolls reads, "For more than five decades, Barbie has encouraged girls to dream and imagine themselves as everything from a mermaid to a movie star, a fairy to a fashionista and a princess to a president" (2015). The body of the Barbie doll acts as an avatar for the girl, who imagines herself inhabiting it. This relationship between the player and the avatar/doll mirrors aspirational relationships between boy players and hyper masculine avatars as well.

This issue of embodiment complicates *Barbie Fashionistas'* attempt to draw a definitive line between the player and the doll. Though the game's texts address the player as being distinct from the doll, the context of the game as a Barbie product and its evocation of traditional ways of playing with Barbies reinforce the bodily identification that girls have with Barbie dolls. "The Barbie doll is illustrative of how perceived human beauty has evolved and demonstrates elements of our nature that are perceived as beautiful. [...] The Barbie doll shows us what we wish to be. It emphasizes our derived evolutionary physical traits and possibly that is why the physical characteristics of the doll are perceived as attractive" (Magro, 1997, p. 373). In this sense, Barbie dolls are inherently aspirational and, particularly for young girls, will consistently elicit identification.

As a result of this unique identification that results from playing with (either material or virtual) Barbie dolls, the question of racial representation must also be considered. Unlike *Tampon Run* (which offers no option for the player to change the avatar's race) and *Wonder City* (which only offers three different racial options), *Barbie Fashionistas* has more racial representation in its various dolls. When the player first goes to the "Closet," she is told to choose her "favorite" among six dolls, four of whom appear to be white, one of whom appears to be black, and one of whom has light brown skin. However, once the player chooses one of these dolls she has the option to change the doll in the same way that she can change the doll's outfit (by choosing an icon of Barbie's profile, which brings up doll options that the player can scroll through). In this part of the "Closet" there are 30 different dolls and 50 total doll choices (since there are multiple versions of some of the dolls with different accessories). That there are more bodily options in the "Closet" represents a consumerist commodification of the body. On top of these choices, some dolls' hair color can be changed if the player touches the doll's head, offering additional options. Of the 30 dolls, 20 appear to be white and 10 appear to be people of color.

The *Barbie Fashionistas* dolls quantitatively provide more options for racial representation than *Tampon Run* or *Wonder City*. However, it is notable that most of the non-white dolls are not immediately accessible to the player, who needs to navigate through the "Closet" section in order to get to the full range of doll options. Additionally, most of the dolls have light skin, including many of the dolls who appear to be black. Mattel has recently announced its intentions to improve the diversity of racial representation in Barbie dolls as part of an initiative to improve declining sales. "Mattel

hopes to reinvent the brand this year. In June, Barbie [will] have 23 new looks with different skin tones and hair colors. One has freckles, a wide nose and curly hair. Another has almond-shaped brown eyes and dark skin. Mattel said it wants to make dolls that girls and their moms can better relate to. The dolls will be part of its core Fashionista line” (Associated Press, 2015). This aspect of the company’s recent update of Barbie indicates an ideological distinction between *Barbie Fashionistas* and *Wonder City*, the latter of which included racial diversity of avatars, according to its designers, as part of an effort to improve the representational politics of girl games. However, despite the fact that *Barbie Fashionistas’* diversity in racial representation was likely financially motivated, it provides the greatest amount of racial options for players of all five of the girl games that I examine.

In terms of choice regarding pre-existing outfits, the range of dresses, tops, and bottoms available to the player is enormous. As the Common Sense Media review of *Barbie Fashionistas* states, “Barbie’s closet is truly endless here, giving kids more outfits to choose from than any playroom could handle” (Bindel, 2015). Additionally, the player can change the color scheme of pre-existing outfits. However, the player’s options in the design studio are more limited than they are in the closet. While the design studio offers a range of white (blank) outfits, most of them have an animated lock over them, indicating that they need to be purchased via the app in order to be accessed. This limit, as well as the Barbie advertisements that “pop up” periodically, are how the free app makes a profit.

Without purchasing any of the app’s additional options, the player has access to seven colors, three pattern designs, and two accessories in the design studio. Since the player does not control the cut or design of the available outfits, but rather their color, this

means that the player is relatively limited without purchasing one of the app's "collections." There are eight such "collections," which each cost \$2.99 and include a range of different outfits, accessories, graphics, colors, and prints. Anytime the player attempts to purchase something in the app, a message appears that says, "For grownups: Enter the numbers below." Three numbers are then written out, and the parent of the player is presumed to be the one who enters the numbers in order to agree to purchase something.

It is clear that in numerical terms of choices made available to the player, *Barbie Fashionistas* far surpasses the strictly limited *Tampon Run* and even the choice-driven *Wonder City*. The mechanics of *Barbie Fashionistas* provide the player with seemingly limitless options in regards to pre-existing outfits, a wide range of dolls, and a relatively large selection of originally designed outfits (when the different potential combinations of such outfits are taken into consideration). However, when the player's potential actions are considered, the game becomes more limited than it originally appears. If the game is viewed as providing two central *actions* rather than limitless *options*, it becomes clear that the player's central choice is between designing an outfit and dressing a doll. Additionally, the former necessarily leads to the latter, since once a player has finished designing an outfit, the game prompts, "Do you want to go to the Dressing Room and try it on your Barbie® doll?"

There is no real way to play against the game intentions of *Barbie Fashionistas*. Like *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City*, its mechanics are limited enough that there are little to no opportunities to play against the goals established by the game's designers, unless the player decides to stop playing entirely. There is no way to lose the game, and even

more so than *Wonder City*, *Barbie Fashionistas* rewards all actions equally. No matter how aesthetically displeasing of an outfit the player has chosen, it can always be saved as a photo, a process that allows the player to see the doll and outfit on the cover of a magazine or in a photo shoot. This final image is the closest that *Barbie Fashionistas* gets to having a coherent narrative. However, it does not indicate a true transition or change over time, like *Central Park Wedding Prep* does, since *Barbie Fashionistas* does not follow a make-over “narrative.” Additionally, this game does not provide the player with a true narrative structure, as *Wonder City* does, or with a measurable goal, as *Tampon Run* does. As a result, it is less overt in its ideological functions, though they are still clear and present.

Barbie Fashionistas uses the rhetoric and conventions of Barbie to mandate traditionally feminine behavior and to uphold disproportionate body standards for girl players. The mechanics of *Barbie Fashionistas* are more defined by their absences than by what they make possible for the player. Despite the hundreds of choices that the game offers players, its structure remains relatively rigid. This rigidity is a result of the fact that most of the options made available to players fall under one of a few overall actions that are possible in the game (dressing a doll, designing an outfit, and displaying the final product).

Style Studio: Fashion Designer

Like *Barbie Fashionistas*, *Style Studio: Fashion Designer* is a design and dress-up game. It is also a mobile app, though rather than being available for free in the Apple App Store, *Style Studio* costs \$0.99. This cost is in addition to other optional in-app

purchases that can be made. In the same vein as *Barbie Fashionistas*, these in-app purchases give access to a greater number of clothes, materials, and prints.

Style Studio does not have pre-existing outfits like *Barbie Fashionistas*, so there is a greater emphasis on the options made available in the clothing design. Additionally, the player has greater control over the design of the outfits, since the game gives the player the option to decide among a number of different lengths or styles for most pieces of clothing. For example, if the player designs a layered skirt, she can choose its length from among three different options. As a result, *Style Studio* provides even more design options than *Barbie Fashionistas* does, since it offers variations on particular clothing pieces, more patterns, and virtually limitless color options. The game offers prints that can be superimposed over clothes, and allows the player to customize the colors, sizes, and positions of these prints. *Style Studio* moves beyond the options made possible by *Barbie Fashionistas* to offer significantly more potential choices to the player, particularly in relation to clothing design.

Where *Barbie Fashionistas* is identified on the Apple App Store as being for “Kids 6-8,” *Style Studio* does not have a recommended age range provided. The game seems to be targeted towards older girls, and one parenting site recommends it for the “Tween/Teen” age range (Alexander, 2013). The game requires more detailed manipulation than *Barbie Fashionistas* does, though it is still relatively easy to use. *Style Studio*’s appeal to older girl players is possibly also represented through its models. Though *Barbie Fashionistas*’ dolls are always clothed, *Style Studio*’s begin in their underwear. This aspect of the game evokes real fashion design as well as dress-up dolls (including Barbies, which are necessarily “nude” before they can be dressed). However,

that the models begin in their underwear seems more mature because (for the women models in particular) the undergarments are relatively small and do not cover the vast majority of the models' bodies. Additionally, the models are more realistic looking than most Barbie dolls, so their near-nudity stands out more. Notably, a children-centered YouTube review of *Style Studio* by a man and a young girl (presumably the man's daughter) includes an exchange in which the girl opens up the dress-up section of the game and chooses a model. When the man sees the model in her undergarments, he says, "Wow, good lord. That's inappropriate" (kidsiphoneappreview, 2010). The perception of inappropriateness indicates that the models' near-nudity in *Style Studio* makes it somewhat distinct from other dress-up games. Despite this, as I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, *Style Studio* is similar to *Central Park Wedding Prep* in its use of near-nude models.

There are 11 models in *Style Studio*, six of whom are men and five of whom are women. This is a disproportionate ratio, since there are significantly more clothing options available for the female models than for the male models. *Style Studio* is relatively unique in its inclusion of male models and clothes. The inclusion of male models also complicates the notion of identification in relation to models, dolls, or avatars, particularly if the game is read as a girl game and understood via the tropes and characteristics of that genre. Because this game does not include Barbie or the identification historically associated with her, it does not ask its players to engage in the type of identification present in *Barbie Fashionistas*. Though *Style Studio* does address the player directly with its instructions, like *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City*, it never addresses the player as one of the models. Instructions address the player as a designer,

with statements like, “These buttons allow you to perform specific actions on the selected item.” The text in *Style Studio* explicitly distinguishes between the player and the models with instructions like, “These buttons allow you to add clothings [sic] and accessories to the model.”

The gender distinctions between the models reflect the game’s rigid enforcement of a gender binary. Models who are labeled as men have traditionally masculinized bodies with exaggerated biceps and abdomen muscles, while models who are labeled as women have small frames and thin waists. Gender is presented in a significantly traditional way, not only in that people are either men or women, without the potential existence of a gender spectrum, but also in that men and women’s bodies are presented in stereotypical physical fashions. The women of *Style Studio*, though they are not quite as biologically impossible as Barbie dolls, are still all the same thin size. Additionally, the game’s mechanics make it impossible for the player to apply male clothes to female models or female clothes to male models. This absence of the option to apply gendered clothes to models of the “opposite” gender reflects another reinforcement of a strict gender binary that is cisnormative. The models also have different hairstyles and accessories that can be applied to them based on gender. Despite the fact that there are only 11 models in *Style Studio*, significantly less than the number of dolls available in *Barbie Fashionistas*, the game has relatively good racial diversity. Eight of the models appear to be people of color.

Though the ability of players to play against the game intentions in *Style Studio* is relatively limited, there are more opportunities present to subvert the game’s rules and goals than there are similar chances in any of the other games that I discuss. Though there

is no way to lose the game, one can still play against its intentions in some small ways. First, as is the case with *Barbie Fashionistas*, all designs are equal in this game, so that the player can intentionally or unintentionally create bad designs for the models. This opportunity not only allows players to engage with art in creative ways, but also allows them to explore the boundaries and limitations of the game space.

Additionally, the player has the option to save a “design” that is nonexistent, namely, to save a model wearing only her undergarments. This saving action allows the player to use the showcase section of the game to showcase no design at all, subverting the central design function of the game. Finally, in the showcase section, the player can choose to show the model and design on a magazine cover or in a photoshoot. If the player chooses the magazine cover, she can control the size and positioning of the model almost completely. For example, the player can make the model appear upside-down or sideways on the cover, make the model appear extremely small so that she only takes up a tiny portion of the cover, or make the model so large that the image becomes ruined, with some portions of the model’s body disappearing erratically and up to half of the body not being able to fit on the cover. This option is not available if the player chooses the photoshoot, since the latter is presumably “live.”

Furthermore, the game provides a “dress a friend” option that appears to open up a number of possibilities to the player. The game encourages the player to choose from a pre-existing photo or take a photo of a friend in order to “dress” them in the clothes that the player has designed. The game suggests, “For best results, get them to pose like the model,” and superimposes a gray image of a female model’s silhouette over the phone’s camera. With this feature of the game, the player is given the opportunity to play with the

clothes that she has designed in various ways, and also has the potential to subvert the goals of the game by undermining the photography or application of design processes. This intersection between the players' material bodies and the game space represents another way in which models and avatars are aspirational.

The ways in which *Style Studio*'s mechanics give the player the opportunity to play against the game's intentions are limited. The game itself is relatively structured, though not as overtly as any of the previous games that I have discussed. However, I believe that the game's occasionally less controlling mechanics indicate something distinct about *Style Studio*'s relationship to other girl games. This game represents an extension of the logic of *Barbie Fashionistas*, one that encourages creativity in the player through enormous amounts of design options. The expansion of the options available to the player, though they do not indicate any substantial ideological change, do appear to create more opportunity for the challenging of the game structure. The mechanics of the game (in the instances that I discussed) subsume the goals of the game in favor of the player's control over certain aspects of the game space, namely, the clothes and models. This privileging of the player's control over the game's design functions is notable because it represents an emphasis on choice and autonomy that is characteristic of all of the traditional girl games that I discuss.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter argue that “*video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire—planetary, militarized hypercapitalism—and of some of the forces presently challenging it*” (2009, p. xv). They conclude that the worlds and narratives of most video games reproduce imperial logic as it is represented by capitalist and military systems. However, though they argue that the content of most video games is imperialistic in

nature, they also acknowledge that the “form” of games, their medium specificity as it is represented by and enacted through gameplay mechanics, has a more complex and potentially subversive relationship with imperialist power structures. In this sense, the authors suggest that video games and the culture surrounding them are characterized by “deep ambivalence” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 228).

Despite the fact that gameplay mechanics are inherently limiting (their function is to determine those actions that it is impossible for the player to take), the fact that games like *Style Studio* allow for as much autonomy as they do makes them distinct from other media. The choices that the video game provides us, even if they are often illusory choices, allow for a type of potential empowerment not often seen. Video games allow for the player to develop a critical relationship with systems of power. As Kirkpatrick writes of the socio-political effects of video games’ medium specificity, “Viewed in aesthetic terms, play with a video game involves the reconciliation and synthesis of a variety of kinds of rule systems” (2011, p. 228). Despite the apparent rigidity of the rules in game space, players are actually given the opportunity to interact critically with the structures that they are given to work with, as is the case in some areas of *Style Studio*.

The option of playing outside of the rules established by the game space introduces nuance to our understanding of games like *Style Studio*. The creativity that it encourages provides girl players with a space in which they are able—however minimally—to subvert or clash with the rules and structures of the game. This in itself is a unique opportunity represented by girl games as a genre. This does not, however, change the thematic content that *Style Studio* conveys, which involves an ideological reinforcement of the gender binary and gender essentialism. Rather than arguing in

complete defense of games like *Style Studio*, I want to complicate our reading of them in order to allow for an acknowledgement of the fact that the mechanics of the game serve functions that are distinct from its narrative. In this case, they introduce girl players, perhaps for the first time, to a game space that is malleable and that allows them to challenge it.

Central Park Wedding Prep

The final game that I will analyze is different from *Barbie Fashionistas* and *Style Studio* in that it is an online game rather than a mobile app. *Central Park Wedding Prep* is available for free through girlgames.com, one of many websites that collect girl games. This game is also available through a number of other girl game websites, a phenomenon that is relatively normal for many online games. [Girlgames.com](http://girlgames.com) is owned by Hallpass B.V. (located at hallpass.com). Hallpass is a “free gaming service website” with its own terms of use and privacy policy (Hallpass, 2010). Hallpass provides a wide range of games, including puzzles, dress-up games, role-playing games (RPGs), and even bloody “Stick Slaughtering Games” that do not appear to be geared towards children (Hallpass, 2014).

Central Park Wedding Prep follows more of a narrative than either *Barbie Fashionistas* or *Style Studio*. The game combines makeover and dress-up subgenres in order to allow the player to give the avatar a series of facial treatments and then choose her hair, makeup, and wedding attire. By the end of the game, the made-over bride is shown with her groom next to a red car, with Central Park as the backdrop. *Central Park*

Wedding Prep includes accompanying narrative texts on some of the girl game websites that it is hosted at. Notably, these narrative texts vary among websites.

On *girlgames.com*, the text below the game reads, “Arielle has always loved Central Park and living in New York City. She’s lucky that her parents are rich enough to host a wedding in Central Park around all of the dogs and high rise buildings that surround the acres of green leaves! Makeover this young bride for an excellent wedding ceremony!” (Hallpass, 2015). That this version of the narrative text makes a point of mentioning that the bride’s parents are paying for the wedding is notable, since another version begins, “Not everybody has the chance to have their wedding in Central Park, the most popular park in the New York City. Central Park is a sensational wedding location and this bride is a lucky bride, as her groom has surprised her with a Central Park Wedding” (Play Wedding Games, 2012). A third version of the game’s narrative text includes the statement, “The bride and the groom eloped from their wedding reception in a fancy Manhattan restaurant to have their wedding photo album done in Central Park, since they could not have a Central Park wedding” (y8.com, 2013).

These three narrative texts all emphasize the desirability, expensiveness, and competitiveness of Central Park as a wedding location. As a result, of the games that I have examined, *Central Park Wedding Prep* is the one most clearly aligned with a class-based ideological narrative. It provides girl players with a Cinderella story in which they can imagine themselves, through the avatar, being gifted with a Central Park wedding and all of the cultural capital that it represents. Even the y8.com version of the narrative, which makes the goal of the game a less expensive photo shoot, still allows the player to enact a fantasy of social mobility. It states, “Central Park is a great location for your

wedding ceremony and your wedding photos. Have you ever considered having your wedding photos taken in Central Park, ladies?” (y8.com, 2013). In this sense, though the game’s instructions differentiate between the player and the avatar, they still allow for identification. This identification, combined with the game’s narrative and mechanics, promotes its ideological functions.

Central Park Wedding Prep is centered thematically on the transition of the bride from a character with heavy acne and unplucked eyebrows to one with flawless skin and bridal attire. This transition mirrors the social mobility fantasy that is rhetorically conveyed through the game’s various narrative texts and instructions. Arguably, it is also simply a realistic portrayal of the types of beauty treatments that many American women go through before their weddings. Many other makeover games include the early elements of *Central Park Wedding Prep*, such as the need for the player to paint various different facemasks over the avatar’s face and use a metal tool to pop the avatar’s pimples. These aspects of the game serve somewhat contradictory (and perhaps not entirely conscious) purposes. On the one hand, they normalize acne and eyebrow hair in particular as aspects of many people’s lives that particularly affect pre-pubescent and teenage girls. Alternatively, these aspects present acne and errant eyebrows as being the “Before” of a transitional process during which the avatar eventually achieves an unrealistically perfect face.

The ritual of the makeover in *Central Park Wedding Prep* and other girl games like it particularly emphasizes the notion of cleansing the avatar’s skin. The player begins by scrubbing and rinsing the avatar’s face, an action that is later followed by wiping away the dark circles under her eyes and then popping her pimples. Rather than the pimples

disappearing entirely, the avatar is left at this point with red marks that no longer have whiteheads on her face. At this point, the player paints an orange facemask over the avatar's face and then rubs it in with a disembodied, gloved hand before rinsing it off. The red marks are then gone and the avatar's skin is clear. However, the avatar still has a final facial mask, this one purple, to wear. The player paints this on and then places rose petals over the avatar's eyes for a shortened period of time. The player then uses tweezers to pluck stray hairs from the avatar's eyebrows, the final action in the makeover section of the game.

This preoccupation of the game with transforming the avatar's face evokes discourses about women's bodies, disgust, and abjection that have a long social history. As Fahs writes, "Women's bodies have often served as contested terrain in battles over agency, control, power, and identity" (2014, p. 167). These contestations often involve the characterizing of women's bodies as being, in their natural state, disgusting or abject (Fahs, 2014, p. 167). As a result, the rituals associated with cleansing have particular meaning when considered alongside a depiction of women's unaltered bodies as disgusting, as is the case with the eyebrows and acne of the avatar in *Central Park Wedding Prep*. Bodily disgust is also associated with immorality. Zhong and Liljenquist's (2006) research indicates a relationship between guilt and cleansing rituals, as well as between assuaging guilt through cleansing and feeling that one has been cleared of guilt. "Exposure to one's own and even to others' moral indiscretions poses a moral threat and stimulates a need for physical cleansing. [...] Threats to moral purity activate a need for physical cleansing, which can assuage moral emotions" (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006, p. 1452). The cleansing rituals present in *Central Park Wedding Prep*

provide the player with a depiction of women's bodies as being naturally disgusting (in need of being changed). This aspect of the game then provides players with the means by which they can make the avatar's body clean, and subsequently, clear of guilt. The woman has to be purified before her wedding, a ritual that reinforces longstanding misogynistic narratives in which women are immoral and physically disgusting.

The avatar of *Central Park Wedding Prep* is a white woman, and is distinct from the dolls of *Barbie Fashionistas*, the models of *Style Studio*, and the various potential avatars of *Wonder City* in a number of ways. First, like *Tampon Run*, *Central Park Wedding Prep* does not allow the player to control any aspect of the avatar's appearance. Though I use the term avatar here, the term is not applicable to *Central Park Wedding Prep* in the same way that it is applicable to *Tampon Run*. The avatar does not act as an embodiment of the player, and the player does not control the avatar's actions. This aspect of the relationship between the player and the avatar is due to the fact that the player does not act *through* the avatar, but rather *on* her. Dovey and Kennedy situate the avatar as being part of the broader "ways in which we are re-embodied within the game world itself—critically what means are used by the game to feed back to us as players our actions, experiences, and progress within the game world" (2006, p. 107). In this sense, I use the term avatar to refer to the bride in *Central Park Wedding Prep* because she is intended to represent an aspirational goal for the player, as is evidenced by the narrative texts that encourage the player to sympathize with her.

That the avatar's race is automatically white, and that the player cannot change it, reflects the naturalization of whiteness that is a pervasive aspect of American popular culture, and that makes whiteness both aspirational and the "norm." Additionally, since

the player is expected by the game texts and mechanics to identify with and aspire to be the avatar, the avatar's whiteness represents the association of womanhood with whiteness. The game reinforces structural racism through the notion that women as an identity group are defined by a naturalized whiteness. As a result, the game denies representation to people of color and particularly to girls of color, who are rarely afforded images of women who look like them in the context of American popular culture.

To conclude my analysis of *Central Park Wedding Prep*, I will discuss the second half of the game, which moves on from a makeover theme to a dress-up one. After the player completes the makeover, the avatar appears in lingerie to be dressed and given make-up and other accessories. It is notable that the avatar is significantly thin and has a body that is comparable to that of Barbie, with a very small waist and thighs that are out of proportion to her breasts and hips. The player is instructed to choose the avatar's make-up first, prolonging the amount of time that the avatar appears in her undergarments in the game. This sequence is comparable to the appearance of the near-nude models who appear in *Style Studio*, and would likely be considered equally as "inappropriate" by parents who object to the latter. The player can change the avatar's lipstick, eye color, eyeshadow, mascara, and blush, of which there are eight options each. The player can then select a necklace for the avatar, of which there are seven options. Once a necklace is selected, matching earrings appear to accompany it. The player can then select the avatar's eyeliner and hair styling. Of the latter, there are seven options, six of which offer a dark brown shade of hair color with varying styles and accessories, and one of which offers a lighter brown shade of hair color. Finally, the player can choose from eight wedding dresses of varying colors.

Once this is complete, the player is brought back to the first eye color menu, an aspect of the game that encourages players to continue playing by extending their experimentation with different selections and combinations. When the player is done selecting, she can choose a check mark button that indicates that she is finished, after which the player is rewarded with an image of the completed avatar next to her groom in Central Park. The game's aesthetics, particularly the cartoonish appearance of the avatar and her groom, indicate that it is intended for very young audiences. The mechanics of this game are notable in that they provide several apparent choices (represented by the relatively wide variety of types of makeup that are available), while simultaneously exercising strict control over the player's in-game options. This control is perhaps best represented by one particular aspect of the first half of the game.

During the avatar's makeover, the player is guided to her actions by a large, pink, moving arrow, which directs the player to the next tool that she needs to use on the avatar's face. Once the player selects the tool, her cursor becomes the tool (such as, for example, a sponge or a showerhead). With some of the tools, the player must apply them multiple times to different parts of the avatar's face, which is segmented into five areas. For example, the first step of the game involves scrubbing soapy water over the avatar's forehead, nose, chin, and right and left cheeks. Additionally, different tasks are separated from one another chronologically. Once the player finishes one step (such as scrubbing the avatar's face and then rinsing the soapy water off with a showerhead), the player must click on a new pink arrow that moves her forward and on to the next task. For certain tasks, the game will prompt the player not only with the pink arrow, but also with other flashing signals. For example, when the player has to wipe away the dark circles under

the avatar's eyes, the circles flash red and green to indicate where the player must click next. Every task must be fully completed before the player can progress through the game.

There is one way in which the player can play against the game intentions of *Central Park Wedding Prep*, which stands out as the exception. As in *Style Studio*, the player has the option to display her creation whenever she chooses. As a result, it is possible for the player to refuse to dress or put make-up on the avatar, and to conclude the game with the image of the avatar in her lingerie next to the groom. This aspect of the game is notable because it represents the only portion of an otherwise strictly controlled game world in which the player has the option to undermine the goals and functions of the game.

Despite this exception, *Central Park Wedding Prep* exerts stringent control over what is and is not possible for the player. What is notable is that the game provides the illusion of choice to the player nevertheless, incorporating the pink arrow in such a way that the player feels she is causing her own progression rather than following the sequence that is built into the game's design. Additionally, the mechanics of the game enforce a relatively misogynistic ideology, in which the woman's body must be utterly flawless before she is worthy of being married. In accordance with the game's structure, the avatar cannot have a single eyebrow hair out of place or hint of acne on the day of her wedding. The wedding itself is ascribed enormous importance and represents, in this sense, both a heteronormative and patriarchal institution that dominates the game world.

Conclusion

What *Barbie Fashionistas*, *Style Studio*, and *Central Park Wedding Prep* all share is a strong commitment to the appearance of choice for the player. Each of these games centers on the apparent empowerment of the player to express herself through design, fashion, and make-up. However, these games also utilize strict mechanics in order to enforce particular ideologies and worldviews that have the potential to be harmful to girl players. Though these ideological functions of the games are likely unintended on the part of the game developers, or at least incidental to their primary goals, they are also reinforced by the central financial functions of the games. The advertisements present in the girl games I discuss, as the central means of profit for the game developers, have a strong relationship with the ideologies embedded in the games' mechanics. They not only reinforce consumerist norms, but also regressive gender politics. Nevertheless, my analysis has shown that there are nuances to each of these games, which indicate that the genre of girl games itself has a complicated relationship to player autonomy and identity-based ideology.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Video games have become a highly contested cultural space. This is particularly evidenced by Executive Director of the IGDA Kate Edwards' statement, "The entire world around [male gamers] has changed. Whether they realize it or not, they're no longer special in that way. Everyone is playing games" (qtd. in Wingfield, 2014). This issue of gendered access to games and gaming is arguably at the heart of controversies around, for example, Sarkeesian's *Feminist Frequency* and the #GamerGate phenomenon. Where the video game industry and community were once more certain about their player demographics and ideological, gendered functions, the perception of increased participation by women players and feminist critics in gaming has challenged ideas about what gaming is and for whom it exists.

One way to understand the effect of this change on video games as a medium is to analyze a genre that was originally built around traditional conceptions of gender and gendered gaming. Girl games represent one of the outlets through which gamers and game producers are grappling with the issues that have emerged in the face of changes to the industry and community. The goal of my research was to examine the gameplay mechanics of five mobile and online girl games in order to understand how these games engage with gender- and identity-based ideologies. My research questions included the following: What are the ideological functions of gameplay mechanics in mobile and online girl games? How do these mechanics engage ideologically with the aesthetics and narratives of the games? How do mobile and online girl games reproduce and respond to the tropes and characteristics of the girl game genre? Finally, how do the mechanics of

mobile and online girl games affect players' options for identity performance within the games? I found that the mechanics of the girl games that I studied served the ideological functions of either challenging or reinforcing the patriarchal ideologies commonly associated with traditional girl games. By working in tandem with the games' aesthetics and narratives, the activist and traditional games advanced various gendered ideologies. This was partly done through either positive or negative engagements with the tropes that are commonly associated with traditional girl games. The mechanics of the games that I studied affected players' options for identity performance by limiting and shaping the extent to which players had control over the avatars' appearance, including gender, race, and size.

Conducting these analyses allowed me to understand the contradictions and complications inherent in girl games' mechanics-based ideological approaches. Where activist and educational games like *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City* rely on highly limiting and structured mechanics, design and dress-up games like *Barbie Fashionistas* and *Style Studio* use the apparent presence of numerous player options to provide a perception of empowerment for their players. Only the relatively limiting structure of *Central Park Wedding Prep* appears to “match” its regressive gender politics with extremely controlled player autonomy. These apparent contradictions provide us with insight into the relationship between gendered ideologies and mechanics-determined game world autonomy.

Activist and politically driven games benefit from highly limiting mechanics because such mechanics present a specific and ethically charged worldview. “Games display text, images, sounds, and video, but they also do much more: *games simulate how*

things work by constructing models that people can interact with” (Bogost, Ferrari, & Schweizer, 2010, p. 6). Bogost’s (2007) notion of procedural rhetoric is thus particularly applicable to games like *Tampon Run* and *Wonder City* because these games create worlds whose procedures reflect particular ideological goals. *Tampon Run* envisions and advances the creation of a world where menstruation is normalized and openly talked about by forcing players to engage with tampons as the central object of interaction in the game. *Wonder City* encourages girl players to exceed the limitations established on them by gendered socialization through providing them with a world in which there are multiple ways to be heroic. Though these games are relatively limiting in mechanical terms when compared to more traditional girl games like *Barbie Fashionistas* and *Style Studio*, they nevertheless advance gendered ideologies that introduce girl players to a greater number of “real world” possibilities.

The apparently limitless options available to players via *Barbie Fashionistas* and *Style Studio* ultimately shield the ways in which these games are ideologically and mechanically limiting. Increased player autonomy is associated with empowerment despite the fact that the central actions available to the player, however many options they may be associated with, reinforce patriarchal ideologies. Additionally, increased option availability associated with accessories, clothing types, and clothing styles do not reflect the limited availability of distinct actions that are available to the player in these games. The mechanics of *Central Park Wedding Prep* are limiting as compared to those of *Barbie Fashionistas*, *Style Studio*, and even *Wonder City*. However, *Central Park Wedding Prep* still mirrors the model of other traditional girl games in that it appears to

provide a number of distinct options to the player while, in reality, advancing her on a highly limited narrative path.

The association between regressive ideologies and a greater amount of available options in traditional girl games mirrors the dominant neoliberal rhetoric of freedom and choice. As a result, the notion that a greater number of choices reflects greater liberty for the player/consumer acts as an extension of neoliberal and capitalist logic. This logic posits that choices among different products, political parties, and other aspects of consumers' and citizens' daily lives are empowering to those consumers and citizens. As a result, the ideologies that I associate with traditional girl games are characteristic not only of gaming culture, but also of culture at large in the U.S. context.

None of the girl games that I analyzed presented narratives or themes that dealt with race or racism. Additionally, most of the games were highly limiting in terms of the availability of racial representation in avatars. This is limiting in two ways: first, the mechanics of these games tend to normalize whiteness as a default racial category and marginalize the racial identities of people of color, and second, these mechanics present absolutist gendered narratives that universalize the experiences of white girls without accounting for intersecting identities, including race, that affect gendered experience.

Additionally, class-based narratives in the traditional girl games, particularly *Central Park Wedding Prep*, serve highly specific ideological functions in that they uphold dominant narratives about class in contemporary capitalist systems. These games present their players with fantasies of upward mobility and advance players' uncritical participation in consumerist culture. This aspect of traditional girl games is not only present in their narratives and in-game mechanics, but also, in the case of mobile games,

in their medium. *Barbie Fashionistas* and *Style Studio* encourage players to purchase additional materials in order to increase their in-game selection, providing them with material as well as virtual ways in which they can practice or play at being consumers.

Mobile and online girl games, though they often appear simplistic in their design and narratives, have a complex relationship not only to gendered ideologies but also to player autonomy as it is enabled or limited by gameplay mechanics. My analyses have reflected the ways in which girl games are in conversation with larger issues around gender and gaming. I have shown how the autonomy provided to the player by mechanics is often deceptive and can serve contradictory functions, as when a game is highly limited in order to convey feminist ideologies, or option-saturated in order to enforce patriarchal ones.

APPENDIX

GAME INFORMATION

Games	Year released	Developer(s)	Game type	Versions available	Associated entities
<i>Barbie Fashionistas</i>	2012; updated 2015	Mattel, Inc.	Mobile app	1	
<i>Central Park Wedding Prep</i>	2012	IDEA Studios	Online game	Approx. 8	EnjoyDressUp.com
<i>Style Studio</i>	2010; updated 2011	XMG Studio Inc.	Mobile app	1	
<i>Tampon Run</i>	Online: 2014; Mobile: 2015	Andrea Gonzales and Sophie Houser	Online game; mobile app	2	Cheryl Houser
<i>Wonder City</i>	2013	Kelcey Edwards and Kristy Guevara-Flanagan	Online game	1	PBS; Games for Change

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