ABSTRACT

CHOOSE YOUR IDENTITY: GENDER IDENTITY FORMATION
THROUGH VIDEO GAME CHARACTERS

This study aims to discover how individuals who are outside of the video game industry's target audience of young, straight, heterosexual males determine their standing within the industry. The participants ($n = 45$) were nontraditional gamers (LGBTQ individuals, women, and individuals over the age of 30). This study used the interpretive paradigm and qualitative research method in order to determine how participants viewed themselves in the gaming world and the portrayal of characters within the games themselves. Participants were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire about the gaming industry and how they fit within it. These questions focused on how the participants identified themselves within the confines of the gaming industry, the future of LGBTQ characters in video games, and opinions toward traditionally gendered video game characters. The largest finding in this study discovered participants' gender did not play a part in their gamer identity. Occurrences such as dedication to gaming and not fitting the gamer mold were reasons they did not identify as gamers. Other findings include participant's lack of faith in the gaming industry to properly create and display LGBTQ characters without potentially damaging stereotypes. This study hopes to further research of how stereotyped video game characters can affect players and their daily lives.

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CHOOSE YOUR IDENTITY: GENDER IDENTITY FORMATION

THROUGH VIDEO GAME CHARACTERS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION/LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Video games have been in a constant state of evolution for decades (Beck & Wade, 2004). Heavily pixilated graphics, stunning high definition picture, massive open world maps that invite hours of exploration, and complex storylines have changed the way gamers interact with this digital pastime. When compared to the early days of gaming, characters that players control have also improved over the years. These characters have gone beyond a simple square or humanoid figure into larger-than-life creations with character development, realistic facial features, and unique personalities that make them easily relatable and more likely to create an interactive experience. In addition to advances in gameplay and characters, advertising is another area of expansion in these games. Studios create, or hire individuals tasked with creating, massive trailers which draw fans into the game, especially the video game industry's target audience.

Bortun, Purcarea, and Davila (2013) have pointed out that focusing on a target audience is an approach many companies take in order to create methods of predicted sales and budget costs. Essentially, if companies' focus on a particular group versus everyone at once, not only could it cut costs, but help raise their profits (Bortun et al., 2013). Sally Reavis, a Nintendo spokesperson, pointed to a reality of video game marketing: "[B]oys are the market. Nintendo has always taken care of their core consumers very seriously. As girls get into that core group, we will look for ways to meet their needs" (Carroll, 1994, p. 4D). Historically, young White males have been the perceived and targeted demographic for the gaming industry, and this reflects what type of people are traditionally thought of

as gamers. This conflation of gaming, youth, and maleness then has implications for who has and has not claimed the term gamer.

The term "gamer" is used to describe an individual who plays video games (Shaw, 2011, p. 29). In the Entertainment Software Association's (ESA) most recent demographic data, males account for 56% of gamers, while females make up the remaining 44% (ESA, 2015). Despite the similarity in percentages, the industry tends to believe gamers are teenage males, which is why many companies prefer to view teenage males as the "target audience" for video games (Ivory, Fox, Waddell, & Ivory, 2014; Ivory, 2006; Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009; Soukup, 2007, p. 161).

While there exists many different genres of video games, such as fantasy and action, a common theme within the scholarship about this medium is how gender is displayed and constructed through various forms of media related to gaming. More often than not, females within video games will be displayed as sexualized objects, starved for male attention (Dickerman, Christensen, & Kerl-McClain, 2008). Males in games, however, are often seen as the all-powerful conquering hero. In most cases, nobody can stand in their way, especially not a female (Dickerman et al., 2008, p. 22). Game developers, those individuals or studios who create the games, tend to cater to that specific audience, which in turn leads to questionable representation for other people who love playing games who do not fit this identity (Soukup, 2007). These gender representations affect players well after gameplay immersion has ceased. For instance, consistent representation of video game female characters as sexualized objects has been shown to affect how people perceive females in the real world (Yao, Mahood, & Linz, 2010). The purpose of this study is to reveal how nontraditional gamers determine and identify with gamer status and their subsequent feelings, beliefs, and attitudes on

the gendered and sexualized portrayal of the characters in video games throughout the gaming industry and its surrounding communities. In this study, chapter 1 will share the relevant literature concerning gender identity construction, gender expectations, video game stereotypes, and the environment they all work together to create. Chapter 2 explains this study's use of the interpretive paradigm and the qualitative research process used to answer the research questions, gather and analyze the data. Chapter 3 details the major findings from the beliefs participants of this study held surrounding the video game industry and the characters in video games. Chapter 4 discusses the results of this study and how the findings extend our understanding of video games, gender, and nontraditional gamers.

<div align="center">Review of Literature</div>

Before properly analyzing the gathered data, a strong background in the foundational literature surrounding video games and gender must first be built. First, to understand how gender identity is created individually and culturally one must first understand how socialization helps to create, shape, and perpetuate gender stereotypes, norms, and roles. Socialization of gender leads to a gender identity construction that is then performed through daily actions and expressions. These performances are often treated in binary, either masculine or feminine, and align with strict gender roles for males and females within society. Below, this literature is summarized to explore how gender, gender identity, and performances of gender are displayed and interpreted through the video game medium.

Gender Identity Construction

The concepts of sex and gender were long thought to be stable and innate; it wasn't until the late 1970's that a nonbinary concept of gender was widely acknowledged (Wood, 2014). Hamburg and Lunde (1966) argued that the

correlation between biological sex and enacted behaviors is, at best, an assumption with little evidence to support it. They found that one's behavior is shaped by more than just hormonal makeup; human behavior is shaped by our environments. Our lived experiences create and shape our identity, along with our culture and socialization, in addition to our biology. Gender identification is created through lived and embodied acts, the discursive and nondiscursive communication that people utilize in their daily lives (Wood, 1994).

Hamburg and Lunde (1966) did state, however, that a normative gender role is often created and reinforced onto a person based on their biological sexual make-up. These gender roles are both a cause and effect of the conflation of a person's biological sex and social constructed gender; as certain behaviors for certain sexes are reinforced, so too is the seemingly inherent connection between maleness and masculinity, femaleness and femininity. Additionally, Mischel (1966) stated that observing both face to face and mediated expressions of gender influence one's own behavior. Wood (1994) argued that these images of gender roles reaffirm what it means to be a man or a woman; who and what that type of person should do, say, look and act like, and how others should treat them. Mischel called these gender roles "sex-typed behaviors" (p. 56) as certain behaviors elicit certain consequences for certain sexes. For example, performing traditional masculine behaviors will typically produce a greater level of acceptance when performed by a biologically male body, as opposed to a female one. These sex-typed behaviors reinforce the assumption that sex and gender are somehow related.

Additionally, communication scholars have since argued that sex and gender exist on a spectrum, instead of a strict binary of male/female, man/woman, or masculine/feminine (Wood, 2014). To imagine gender on a spectrum allows for

the reimagining of identity in a way that is fluid. Gender is created and enacted through lived experiences and embodied choices (Wood, 1994). These choices can then be any combination of masculine and feminine, or neither, and is constantly evolving. This fluid interpretation of gender removes the connection between gendered traits and anatomical sex and allows us to break the traditional connections between maleness and masculinity, or femaleness and femininity. These traditional connections between gender and sex are influenced and learned through observation of stereotypical and normative gender expression.

Socialization and gender roles. Social learning theory refers to the idea that people learn or are socialized to be masculine and feminine through communication and observation. Children notice how certain people perform gender, and deem what is considered appropriate, and will often imitate traditional gender norms as they see them praised (Mischel, 1966). Society often commends individuals whose biological sex and gender expression are considered normative (Wood, 2013). Violation of gender norms is often condemned. As children grow, they begin to learn their own gender identity through socializing with family and other adults. With these interactions, we learn to expect certain performances, roles, and norms from certain gender identities. As they get older, the children will decide which gender, or genders, is most suitable for them based on their own lived experiences and the consequences of their past performances (Mischel, 1966).

People of all ages are aware of potential incentives and discipline, so they are more likely to mimic the behavior that will benefit them the most (Mischel, 1966). Certain performances are seen as more or less favorable or acceptable, and these performances vary person to person, and help each individual to create,

evolve, and express their gender identity. Gender identity is continuously constructed through an individual's personal gender expression, or how they behave, carry themselves and dress their bodies within a public setting (Butler, 1993). Gender roles and stereotypes are used to reinforce normative gender expression by re-entrenching the gender binary and a false dichotomy of male and female, masculine and feminine. Gender expression, then, is often limited, or interpreted as limited, to traditional femininity and traditional masculinity. A binary view of gender continues to hurt queer, transgender, and intersex individuals who do not subscribe to societal ideals of traditional gender expression. These traditional gender expressions compact into strict rules, norms, regulations, and roles that each gender is then pressured to uphold.

Traditional gender roles are formed through communication surrounding each gender within society (Mischel, 1966). Many cultures believe people have tasks they are specifically responsible for based on the person's biological sex. For instance, throughout Western culture, White middleclass females have traditionally played their role of the family caretaker due to females being seen as more caring, while the husband's job in the family was to be a provider (Wood, 2013). Even in professional environments, female roles often revolve around positions that require feminine traits of nurturing and caring for other people, while males are more frequently seen as company figureheads and executives due to the privileging of the masculine traits of strength, aggression and leadership in such positions (Wood, 2013). It is important to discuss these particular cultural influences because White, Western culture is often seen as normative. In this way, gender roles relay expectations to society that uphold the idea that males are to perform hegemonic masculinity and females are to perform traditional femininity, creating gender for how males and females conduct themselves.

A powerful influence on gender-role identification is media (Wood, 2013). Stereotypical gender expressions are used and exaggerated for entertainment value, which in turn effects how people perceive themselves (Wood, 2013). As gender identity is created and shaped by socialization, it is influenced by various societal gendered stereotypes, norms, and roles. This socialization comes to individuals in many forms, and various types of media influence gender identity and gender expression. Included in this is the medium of video games, which perpetuate strict gender roles concerning strength and power. As players are exposed to heavily gendered depictions of male and female characters, gender roles and norms are reinforced and a gender binary is supported. While young children are not the only people who can be influenced by media, they are the most likely to be a victim of forming their identity through these means (Wood, 2013). Media impacts gender identity in areas such as advertising, television, magazines, pornography, and most relevant to this study, video games.

Being interested in discovering if their gender identity is a reason for whether or not they consider themselves a true gamer, I will narrow the scope to gender-role identity. Gender-role identity is identified as the way players view their own gender in comparison to normative gender expression and roles portrayed by gamer culture (Ivy & Backlund, 1994). Gamer culture entrenches a gender binary representation and maintains hegemonic roles and stereotypes (Beavis & Charles, 2007) indicative of White, Western culture. Games often reinforce arbitrary sex/gender conflation and the gender binary through stereotypical and hypermasculine and feminine performances by game characters.

<u>Gender Identification and Video
    Games</u>

One common way gamers might encounter differences in gender representation is through the stories in the games and the depiction of their characters. Since the early days of inserting quarters into 6-foot cabinets, video games have used the damsel-in-distress trope. A male hero will save the day while the female character, if she is shown at all, helplessly awaits her rescue (Jansz & Martis, 2007; Schleiner, 2001). A typical example of this trope occurs in *Super Mario Brothers* (Miyamoto, 1985). The player controls Mario, a man on a mission to save Princess Toadstool from his nemesis, Bowser. Players must complete multiple levels, fighting enemies and defeating especially strong and difficult enemies called level bosses. Every time Mario gets close to rescuing the Princess, Bowser always appears to whisk her away to another fortress. Upon the game's completion, the two characters are reunited once more. One of the assumptions behind these gendered depictions is gamers' own gendered stereotypes and the video game industry supporting gender in specific ways. The way video games, much like other forms of media, use gendered stereotypes in games has the potential to influence player gender identity (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). Characters are depicted in stereotypically gendered ways through their physical depictions, sexualization, and performances, which reaffirms gendered stereotypes about male and females in society overall.

<u>Video game characters</u>. There is a long-standing concern with how females are portrayed within these games (Ivy & Backlund, 1994). Female characters often draw comparisons to Dr. Frankenstein's monster, as their creations stem from the best parts of other people (Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001). These unrealistic models set unobtainable standards of what is considered sexy and beautiful. For

example, Juliet Starling from the game *Lollipop Chainsaw* starts the game as an 18-year-old high school senior with a bust to waist that would not be found regularly within nature. Female video game characters are often made up of pieces: the largest breasts, the flattest tummies, the longest legs. To gain such a physique, most real-world women would potentially have to go through numerous procedures, making these female characters less human and more like a Frankenstein monster, which is essentially what these female main characters are (Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001).

Male characters are consistently shown as the hero (Dickerman et al., 2008). The fate of the world rests squarely on their broad shoulders, and they are more than ready to defend it with their oversized weapons and massive muscles. Male villains are a common sight as well. The villain will normally outmatch the hero's physical size, while adding intimidating facial deformities in order to give his counterpart ample challenge (Dickerman et al., 2008). Ganondorf, a powerful and evil magician from *The Legend of Zelda*, towers over Link, the hero. His ultimate goal is to collect all three pieces of the triforce and rule the world, while kidnapping Link's love interest, the princess Zelda, in the process. While he looks physically unable, Link does his best to save Hyrule and his Princess with skill and sheer determination. While this battle between Ganondorf and Link is occurring, Zelda will hardly be seen, unless she is being displayed as a prisoner. In video games, female characters are usually seen as helpless. They are unable to fend for themselves in any capacity, and must wait to be rescued by the hero as a reward for a job well done (Dickerman et al., 2008). The female characters are well known for having unrealistic body types, such as exaggerated hourglass figures, tiny waists paired with large chests. Clothing worn by these characters is

often excessively formfitting, tight, and stereotypically sexy, with little functionality in the missions and stories to be played.

Video game character images. Martins et al. (2009) chose to focus their study on how the female body is displayed and used in video games. Their first two research questions asked whether the body proportions of females in video games reflected those of average females, and whether or not the in-game body sizes varied by realism of the game's graphics. For the third and fourth research questions, they asked whether the processing power of the machines changed body shapes and if the game rating identified any difference in body sizes. The researchers examined 133 games from a wide variety of gaming devices. The results of the first and second research questions found that characters had bigger heads and smaller body proportions, and graphics played a part in how proportions were displayed. The third research question was answered by revealing that realistic games have the smaller body proportions. The final research question discovered that games aimed toward children actually had the least proportionate female characters; they had bigger heads, and the smallest body sizes seen in any type of game.

The discussion suggested that children associated images of thin female characters in cartoons and toys to images such as Barbie and other dolls, which would explain why they appear in children's games as well (Martins et al., 2009). With body representations being thinner than humanly possible, the results mention the potential dangers it can have on players' self-esteem. Because video games give players the ability to interact directly with the character, comparisons between player and the image they are controlling may occur. Numerous body image issues may arise as a result of these extreme body image representations.

Females may feel pressure to match similar size and body weight of these characters despite the inaccuracy of their body proportions. Kennedy (2002) speculated that young girls who are dissatisfied with their bodies could grow to be more frustrated with them with more constant exposure from female characters who are created with female proportions based on male ideals (para. 19).

Despite the popularity of video games increasing among women (Chess, 2012), many game developers still cater to the adolescent male audience (Ivory et al., 2014; Soukup, 2007). Young males between the ages of 15 and ranging from the late 20s to early 30s are consistently considered the age bracket that supports the gaming industry (Ivory et al., 2014; Soukup, 2007). Violent and sexualized video game content are still popular with young male gamers. For those who do not fit this target audience, however, it often leads to feelings of alienation and further acceptance of gender stereotypes (Soukup, 2007). Martins et al. (2009) suggested these female images could help children associate the female body with unrealistic proportions. Thus, male gamers can be affected by such digital creations, as they are only exposed to thin, traditionally feminine and attractive characters, they could be influenced to hold unrealistic expectations of what their ideal partner should look like. This also perpetuates the belief that voyeurism is a socially acceptable practice. It is believed that if a female had this small body type that is used in video games, it would draw attention from males who were used to looking at females however they wanted; he would be free to stare and comment on her look with little input from the woman (Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001). Gendered and stereotypical body portrayal is just one way male and female characters are stereotyped. Video games can also perpetuate many stereotypes about gender and power, gender and task accomplishment, and gender and knowledge, and these stereotypical portrayals may affect gamers.

<u>Video game stereotypes and their effects on the gamer</u>. Video game stereotypes usually display males as exclusively capable of being heroic. They make all the decisions and have total control over every scenario, while females are usually left without a voice. They have no say in what happens to them or what they want to do, letting the male hero make their decisions for them. On the rare occasion of a female hero, she is displayed as a sexualized object, often only achieving her heroic status by being a more sexual creature. Because video games give gamers some influence and control over the in-game situation, gamers feel a strong sense of power over their in-game environment, which could give them a strong sense of power in reality (Jansz & Martis, 2007; Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Yao et al., 2010).

Because video games are a medium that allows more interaction between the player and the mediated content, researchers wonder if there is more potential to have real life effects on the gamer. In fact, research does support the notion that video games do have the power to effect body image, gender identity, and motivation to play video games. Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009) examined female video game characters and how they could potentially affect female gamers' perspective of their bodies. There were 328 undergraduate students (206 female and 122 male) who participated in their project. The first research question asked if the participant's gender would have any influence in determining what is and what is not gender stereotyping. The second research question focused on whether the gamers' immersion in the game has any effect on interpreting whether characters are seen in stereotypical gender roles. The results of the first research question found that playing as a sexualized female character did result in unfavorable attitudes towards females. Not only did both males and females develop poor views on women's mental capabilities, female participants began to

question their own physical capabilities as well. The researchers believe prolonged exposure to gender stereotypes in popular video game characters could affect how players created assumptions of how genders in the real world behave.

Mou and Peng (2009) studied stereotypes and their potential effects on gamers, especially adolescents, who were still developing their gender identity. The authors found that female characters very rarely get cast in a main role. Instead, they were always seen as a supporting character to males, usually sexualized in one way or another. Regardless of the role these stereotypical female characters play, main or background, they can be just as influential on an adolescent whose "self-identity, self-image, gender role perception, as well as their expectation of attitude toward the other gender" is still developing (Mou & Peng, 2009, p. 929). During this developmental stage, adolescents like to live vicariously through other mediums, and video games allow people to test the waters (Mou & Peng, 2009). Video games allow adolescents an opportunity to examine things like fashion styles and activities to see if a particular identity fits before making it real world commitment.

Chan (2008) observed how the gender stereotypes for female gamers would affect their motivation to play video games. During the observation portion of Chan's study, negative repercussions to stereotypes about female gameplay potential were found. During the gameplay experiment, the female gamers who were placed in the stereotype group and had been exposed to negative stereotypes about female gamers played notably worse than the control group, which was not exposed to these stereotypes. The author suggested that for these young players, hearing the stereotype even once during the experiment was enough to affect the player's mindset during gameplay, and that repeatedly hearing such stereotypes on

a regular basis not only would affect gameplay, but their experience of playing video games in its entirety.

Chan (2008) attempted to understand achievement goal theory and how it factors into an individual's motivation. While stereotypes were a large portion of this study, she also observed how more goal-oriented players played the game compared to performance-oriented players. Chan hypothesized those who were more focused on mastering the game would not be as distracted or concerned with stereotypes compared to those who were performance-focused. While there was not a large difference between these two gameplay styles, it was demonstrated that those who were more worried about performance took longer to complete the game because of wanting to prove stereotypes wrong. They knew the stereotypes said they could not finish the level, so they took their time to make sure they did finish. Those who were focused on mastering the game finished much faster because the stereotypes did not affect them. Chan also found that those who were more performance-focused finished the level with better scores than those who wanted to master the game, but had lower expectations for their success. Chan suggested this was due to the performance goal not being met, as the player felt they had more to prove. If they did not win, the stereotype would be correct, whereas those who were focused on mastery just focused on winning and getting better at the game over time.

In Chan's (2008) study, female gamers were exposed to stereotypes that had affected their gaming performance. These stereotypes influenced female gamers to believe that they could not play video games or could not play video games well. The idea of female video game incompetence is a commonly perpetuated stereotype by the video game industry on female gamers. Since the beginning, video games have gone through several changes in their levels, sizes,

and goals. However, the evolution of the representation of gender has remained stagnant. A high volume of games portray male characters as overly masculine and female characters as hypersexualized. This is considered a problem to many, due to how the players respond to these portrayals. The social construction of a gender binary is constantly reaffirmed in video games. Within this binary, gender is seen in correlation with biological sex; males are seen as normatively masculine, females are seen as feminine, and there are no alternatives to those two gender expressions. Due to the strict assumption of femininity in females, gender representation in media, such as video games, becomes influenced by what society deems normative.

Wilberg (2011) focused on how race, gender, and the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities are represented in video games. The author opened with the idea that powerful females who are over-sexualized are not good representations for other females. While they may be depicted as just as strong as their male counterparts, the way they are dressed and proportioned reinforces the valuing of appearance. Wilberg stated that the industry has improved in letting players create queer characters, but is still behind in creating a fully-fledged queer character for the entire gaming community to play. Wilberg observed 1,083 video game characters, and only found 29 of them to be queer. Of those 29, 12 were female and 17 were male, and all were White. The author mentioned certain instances of queerness are accepted, such as female bisexuals and lesbians, due to some appeal to male fantasies. Women were consistently showed as fearful, while women of color always appeared angry at first, then fearful, with no emotion from lesbian or bisexual women (Wilberg, 2011).

Video game characters continue to fall into gendered stereotypes because of who the industry believes is their target audience and the players who support the

masculine defined idea of what a gamer looks and acts like. As the video game industry continues to perpetuate strict gender roles concerning strength and power, players are exposed to heavily gendered depictions of characters and character performances. These gender stereotypes are perpetuated by the industry that creates the characters, and has potential to influence the gamer's gender identity as well as their identification as a gamer.

The Gamer Identity and Gender
    Identity

Shaw (2014) mentioned that while gamer is defined as people who play games, she argued there is a difference between the label and the gamer identity. According to Shaw (2014), the gaming identity is something that is constantly changing. As individuals grow up and go through their lives, they have the ability to freely move between the gamer identity, as someone who plays games, or other specified variations of gamer (Shaw, 2014). Beck and Wade (2004) discussed some of these variations and separated gamer identity into two categories: frequent gamer and moderate gamer. Frequent gamers are the individuals who have been playing for years and spend much of their time playing them, while moderate gamers are people who play occasionally (Beck & Wade, 2004). The influence of gendered stereotypes on a gamer's gender identity and their identification as a gamer is supported in two ways: by the players' support of a gamer as masculine identity and the video game industry's support of the traditional "gamer as heterosexual young adult males (Soukup, 2007). By looking at gender identity, the traditional and non-traditional gamer, both of these influences are analyzed.

Traditional gamers. Since their creation, video games have been seen as a male-dominated pastime due to its association with technology. Jenkins and

Cassell (2008) discussed the idea that technology is usually considered a male-dominated profession due to the focus on math, engineering, and science. Wilder, Mackie, and Cooper (1985) found that even at young ages, children are able to separate objects and activities by labeling them as "for boys or girls." Huff and Cooper (1987) examined developers of educational software and how they created games that would help students engage in learning. They discovered that when developers were asked to create a default piece of software (games that did not require any special amenities for a certain type of student), they made games that favored boys (Huff & Cooper, 1987). Huff and Cooper found that because the developers who made these educational games did so with boys as their target, that male children would become more interested in playing these games. Because the games had been tailored for boys, girls were not as passionate for them. The boys who hung around did so because they loved computers and the games, while the small number of girls in the study who used this software felt it might be useful later in life, not due to any affection to technology. The games created with boys in mind were not creating a desire or building a passion to learn how to operate computers within the girls.

Games are a large reason males were drawn to computers, and they participated in gameplay while inadvertently learning about computers along the way. Females and other individuals who do not fit the traditional gamer identity can certainly play video games, however they are not considered gamers by the industry because they do not meet the traditional criteria. The video game industry is well aware of the tradition of video games being a male pastime, and their products reflect this belief in the idea that they are only creating games in order to reach a certain kind of person, or their target audience. The gaming industry tends to rely on stereotypes that are easily relatable to their target audience, which

means the perceptions and opinions are not always accurate (Soukup, 2007). Much like their digital counter parts, heterosexual males dominate the gaming world, while females and lesbian, gay, transgendered, bisexual, and queer individuals can be seen as trespassing on their space.

The industry's promotion of a male target audience feeds a sense that "true" gamers are only those fitting the characteristics of the target audience. This has created a sense of hierarchy between those who do not play frequently versus those who do (Chess, 2011). Often, the video game industry then creates an environment that demands particular expectations for gendered expression, as this hierarchy correlates with a gender binary, where female gamers are considered less competent or talented at gameplay, and thus are less involved in gaming. Ivory et al. (2014) studied social responses of gamers in multiplayer online environments. Observing first person shooters (FPS), the researchers found that players were more likely to engage in stereotypical male behavior due to pressure from other male players around them. Female players have more pressure when it comes to playing with strangers online, since they are seen as treading upon a space open only to males. The aggressive, violent nature of FPS games is often seen as counter-stereotypical for female players, and their legitimacy is instantly questioned if they do not follow stereotypical female behaviors, such as being passive and caring. Players often use linguistic profiling when it comes to communicating with players online, which can lead to stereotypical treatment and comments from players around them (Ivory et al., 2014). Just by hearing a person's voice, players base a person's identity on stereotypes about the gender or race they sound like (Ivory et al., 2014).

Results of Ivory et al.'s (2014) study found players were expected to behave in line with stereotypical gender roles. Males are expected to be aggressive

and females are to be submissive. This research hints at the thought of biological sex determining gender as well, for instance, the idea of a male identifying as masculine for no other reason than being born biologically male. This assumes performed chosen gender and biological sex are inextricably linked, further entrenching a false male and female dichotomy in gender. Those who do not fit these norms are targeted and harassed within the game. In order to stay competitive and harassment-free, females tend to sex-swap characters and will play as a male character. By choosing a male character and avoiding in-game voice communication, female gamers can act as "one of the guys" while keeping their gender identity intact.

One reason for a young boy's attraction to video games is because many of the games and characters are created by males for males (Mou & Peng, 2009, p. 929). This can be problematic, especially in an industry lacking feminine influence, which can lead to promotion of gender stereotypes that often run rampant within the games themselves (Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001). Males often create heroes in their own image, while females play the role of the sexy sidekick. Females may have a harder time becoming interested in games and gaming culture as good female characters are more difficult to find (Kennedy, 2002).

However, just as games are constantly evolving, the people who play also seek change. In a recent survey, high school and middle school boys overwhelmingly believed females were used for sexualization purposes far too often in video games (Wiseman, 2015). These boys find themselves in the video game industry's target audience, yet many of them are tired of one of the industry's main methods of keeping their interest. This survey also discovered that gender of the main character often does not matter to children (Wiseman, 2015).

As they get older, males actually care less about gender of the main character. Boys who identified as gamers believe females should play a bigger, less sexualized role in the games they play. Being able to understand the need for stronger female presence in video games is taking a step forward in helping those who have a difficultly identifying themselves as a gamer, regardless of the sex of the individuals. It is important to note that female gamers are just one group of individuals often erased from gamer culture.

Female nontraditional gamers. Nontraditional gamers are considered to be individuals who do not fit the target audience model of the industry: young, heterosexual males (Soukup, 2007). While anyone can play games, many believe that certain people who enjoy specific genres can qualify individuals as gamers. The attitudes of these gamers, combined with the industry's drive to create content specifically for this audience, create a harsh environment for anyone who does not fit the mold.

Another issue that can lead to frustration among gamers is the idea of the female gamer infringing on a space reserved for males. Similar to other male-dominated fields, such as professional sports, the word "girl" has a negative connotation within video games. The term girl often acts as a synonym for being weak, showing fear, and other stereotypical emotions that are not considered masculine (Bertozzi, 2009). This idealism seeps into the gaming world during a lot of professional gaming tournaments. Not only do teammates tease players if a female defeats them, but their own masculinity gets called into question during multiplayer games with females (Bertozzi, 2008). On one hand, males are told they should never do harm to a woman, however, they are also taught to always do whatever it takes to win. Because a male gamer may have to kill a female player in

order to win, he is faced with two choices: win and upset a female or lose to a female and suffer any consequences that may occur (Bertozzi, 2008). This mindset often means male players must adjust their play style, but it is left to the players as to how much slack to give these female opponents.

Females face confusion and frustration when it comes to gender stereotypes because they are unsure of how to act. Traditionally, multiplayer and competitive game environments include "aggression, competitiveness and controlled violence" (Bertozzi, 2008). The female stereotype dictates that these behaviors are not feminine and thus should not be displayed by females. Females in these situations often find themselves in similar predicaments as males, left to wonder if it is better to be seen as the weaker sex or come off as a threat to males (Bertozzi, 2008). Bertozzi (2008) believed these kinds of cross-gender competitions resembled 20th-century sporting events when Black males were pit against White males. For years, sports were a White man's game, with a societal belief at the time being White males were more talented and athletic than Black males, so if a Black man were to beat a White man in a boxing ring, everything people believed would suddenly be called into question (Bertozzi, 2008). Similarly, female gamers look to be invading the male space of video games, a traditionally and stereotypically male-dominated pastime, with the societal belief that males are more talented or successful gamers. If a team of female gamers were to beat a team of males at their own game (literally), everything the video game industry has believed and supported up to this point would suddenly need to be looked at in a different manner.

In light of this, many female gamers are attempting to take back the gamer identity. They do their best to show male gamers as well as industry developers they deserve to be gamers, just as much as everyone else through making their

presence known throughout the gaming community. Female gamers exist, in large numbers, but underrepresentation, inaccurate representation, and blatant erasure obscure this fact.

Nontraditional gamer and gendered behavior. Gamer has traditionally and historically been conflated with maleness, which has influenced a separation of terminology among genders. Beavis and Charles (2007) observed and interviewed seven female gamers who frequented online cafes in order to play games online.

The authors discovered that gamers held more binary views of gender, and that "girl gamers" was simply a title for all female gamers. The study's participants felt that all "girl gamers" would be categorically similar, but not similar enough to their male counterparts to be simply called gamers. Something about their gender made them fundamentally different from traditional gamers (Beavis & Charles, 2007). While some of the females found acceptance and recognition from male gamers in their games and were openly accepted, others were harassed because of their sex.

Some female gamers, by being open with their gender and playing games, earned them some respect within the gaming community, showing that some male gamers seemed to understand the idea that women can play, too (Beavis & Charles, 2007). Females who were open about being female and playing games were seen by male gamers as more equal due to the hours they put into practice. In the male gamer opinion, high levels of time commitment by female gamers helped to dispel some of the beliefs and stereotypes about these gamers. While most of these females received respect, many males still gave them trouble, solely based on the fact they were females (Beavis & Charles, 2007). Beavis and Charles believe the female gamers in the study often exaggerated their femininity during

game play to show male gamers that any kind of girl could play, from the most feminine to the more masculine.

Walkerdine (2006) examined adolescent girls playing games in order to determine if girls picked up masculine attributes while playing games while keeping their femininity as well. She found the girls picked characters whom they thought were cute, which could be considered a way to negate the characters' power. If a game introduced a character who was supposed to be evil, but had some element that was seen as cute (say an animal or outfit), it would take away from his evil demeanor. This position simply creates a gendered stalemate; the power distribution between male and female is not equal. Walkerdine learned many of the girls preferred to play make believe in real life based on female television characters. She also found that girls can take up masculine positions during gameplay, but in doing so, they had to take up feminine ones as well (Walkerdine, 2006). As an example, one of the children, Rosie, instructed other girls to commit the violent acts in these games, which gave her a sense of pleasure. In doing so, she was remaining feminine by not committing violent acts, while simultaneously enjoying the aggressive acts on screen. This study evidences that nontraditional gamers create and maintain their gender identities while playing as characters who may not coincide with their own.

Jansz, Avis, and Vosmeer (2010) discussed the game *The Sims 2* and how it attempts to make gaming something that can be enjoyed by both sexes. The authors explained a significant reason for the gendered split in video games is the idea of social role theory. Socialization causes certain behaviors to be categorized as male and female (e.g., aggressiveness means male, passivity means female) (Jansz et al., 2010). The authors then discussed that the industry isn't targeting boys (this study used eight to 12-year old children) as a whole, but they are

targeting a play style more boys possess than girls. Girls use computers and other technology as much as boys, but while boys play more games, girls spend more time communicating via email, social media, or Skype (Jansz et al., 2010).

Jansz et al. (2010) suggested that to get girls into gaming, the games should be created with more communication, caring for others, and exploration to draw girls' attention. They discussed *The Sims 2* because it is a people simulator, which allows for communication with other characters in-game, exploration of their neighborhood or town, and helping their characters function as members of this simulated society. Traditional girl games rarely work because they are too focused on the female stereotypes of the ultra-feminine, and players become disinterested. *The Sims 2* has a large female audience because it does not approach video games the same way as many other games in the industry (Jansz et al., 2010). The reasons behind *The Sims 2* success with female audiences is due to its low intensity, willingness to include more feminine qualities that are not perceived as weak or a liability, and the ability to communicate with other characters.

As Jansz et al. (2010) explained, *The Sims* franchise became a popular game with females due to the developer's desire to just build a game for everyone to enjoy. Because of the lack of marketing to a particular group of people, and the decision to focus on gamers as a whole, the game avoided gendered stereotypes in content and marketing. Games are created, edited, marketed, and advertised for particular groups of people, often male. This assumption of audience has effects that run throughout the industry.

Nontraditional gamers and the gamer community. Sveningsson (2012) explained why there are not as many females as males who play video games. The biggest issue is the usual content of games: violence and gore. While there are

games that are not considered violent, games themselves are often stereotyped as being a masculine pastime. According to traditional gender roles in society, females should not play games because, according to many gamers, it's a male's medium and if a female gamer wants to participate, their play should remain private, personal, and hidden (Sveningsson, 2012).

This advice would prevent females from participating in gaming tournaments and other gaming-related events, as well as conversing with other players in online games (Sveningsson, 2012). Sveningsson mentioned many female gamers have to hide all aspects of their femininity if they want to be taken seriously, or be seen as a "hardcore" gamer. Hardcore gamers are considered to be the best gamers possible. Most people associate hardcore gamers with male gamers, but scoff at the idea of a female gamer holding that same title because video games are a male-dominated pastime. Gamers are often assumed to be male; if female gamers can keep their identity a secret from the competition, they will be treated normally by other players. However, once the illusion is broken and a female gamer is identified, traditional gender roles and hierarchy are suddenly enforced (Sveningsson, 2012).

Sveningsson (2012) revealed the reason for the hostility toward female gamers could be due to certain male gamers being jealous of female gamers and the attention they receive from the industry. A game that can claim popularity among female gamers leaves male gamers confused, and contradicts the belief of gaming being a pastime that is mostly enjoyed by males. If a game is popular with females, the male gamer perceives something has to be wrong with the game, that the game lacks violence or is too simplistic, for it to appeal to women. Because female gamers are a rarity in the gaming world, as soon as male gamers know a female is in the game, all attention moves from the players who are performing

well to the female players (Sveningsson, 2012). This has the potential to lead male gamers to try and impress them with their assumed superior gaming skills or to attempt to protect them from other players in the game who would potentially attack them based because they are female.

Female gamers also gain attention from gaming companies as they are used as a means of advertising games (Sveningsson, 2012). In gaming magazines and convention booths, females will be used to advertise video games with sex appeal. Developers announce that their game is popular with female gamers with the hope that more male players will be drawn to play with them. Additionally, utilizing women in advertising hopes to bring in more females with an interest in gaming. With all this attention on female gamers, some male gamers believe they are trying to invade on their territory. While some male players simply resort to simple taunting of female gamers, others make it their personal mission to keep gaming a male activity by harassing female gamers.

Delamere (2004) observed violence and gender representations in video games through a study of a professional female gaming team. Delamere sought to get the gamers' thoughts about how it felt to be female gamers in a male-dominated industry. Many team members suggested the bond between female gamers was much stronger than the bond between male gamers due to the rarity of female players. To have good, supportive friends within a community that is typically hostile is very important. The team believed that no matter how much sexualization existed within the games, it was nothing compared to how female gamers were treated by males in the real world (Delamere, 2004). This team reported getting harassed frequently; getting hacked at gaming tournaments and receiving threatening messages online by individuals who did not believe they should be playing games solely based on their gender.

The harassment found in the interviews and the survey responses allowed Delamere (2004) to use cultivation theory to make sense of the data. Cultivation theory was as it was believed that sexualized characters created sexualized and violent ideals toward females. This occurs through repeated exposure to these stereotypes. These gamers could understand that what was being shown during game play was wrong, and made the conscious decision to either ignore, reject, or accept it (Delamere, 2004). Many of the participants believed characters were able to transmit negative messages, especially to children who have a harder time separating fiction from real life. Delamere believed this fits into cultivation theory because within video games, males are always seen as the heroes. Many of Delamere's participants were concerned as to how this could affect children viewing gender roles, as well as how females are hypersexually displayed.

It is important to note that female gamers are just one group of individuals often erased from gamer culture and representation. Nontraditional gamers are those who do not fit into the industry's target audience. Nontraditional gamers are not exclusively female, but the term is used to describe anyone who falls outside the established gamer stereotype, including, but not limited to: females, older individuals, people of color, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities, commonly known as the LGBTQ community. While games often hold hypermasculine roles for males and hyperfeminine and/or hypersexualized roles for females, it holds little representation for other identities whatsoever.

LGBTQ nontraditional gamers. Shaw (2014) mentioned many teens who come out as a member of the LGBTQ community often feel alone. Young people who identify as LGBTQ may not have the same support systems as those who

identify as cisgender and heterosexual, often making media a key channel for them to observe and learn social roles, rules and norms. This becomes problematic as many of the writers and creators of media may create characters that play to their personal beliefs or fall into stereotypes, which creates identities based on these unrealistic perceptions. This issue can easily be extrapolated out to apply to any nontraditional gamer. As a result of the industry's overwhelmingly male make-up, assumptions based on how people of certain age, gender, and sexual orientation could lead to inaccurate representations and influences towards nontraditional gamers.

Shaw's (2011) ethnographic study on gamer identity focused on people who did not fit the typical archetype of gamer. Shaw (2011) interviewed 29 individuals who varied in gender, race, and sexuality as a way to determine how they viewed themselves in the gaming culture. Out of everyone surveyed and interviewed, 12 participants defined themselves as "gamers" (four females and eight males), three saw themselves as "sort of" gamers (two females and one male), five saw themselves as "not really" gamers (four female and one genderqueer), and eight did not call themselves gamers (seven female and one transgender). Shaw (2011) questioned whether the reason more males openly called themselves gamers as compared to female, queer, and transgender persons was due to the idea that gaming was considered a heterosexual male hobby. When asked, a few of the female participants felt they could not identify as "gamers" because they did not fit with the "geekier, antisocial aspects…" that are often attached with the gamer tag (p. 38).

In her conclusion, Shaw (2011) discussed that members of these marginalized gaming groups were not comfortable identifying themselves as gamers, as they felt they did not meet the standards of the gaming industry. Shaw

(2011) mentioned many companies try to create "girl games," which may female gamers away from mainstream and popular titles. Additionally, marginalized groups may not consider themselves gamers because they do not consider themselves to be someone who fits the gaming personality. In sum, someone could very well be a gamer, but only view it as a hobby or a way to kill time, instead of an important part of their social identity and life (Shaw, 2011).

The current study was heavily influenced by the multiple literature findings mentioned within this literature review. The first key finding of this literature was Shaw's (2011) study on how individuals identified themselves as gamers. While the participants shared an enjoyment of video games, they did not consider themselves gamers as they felt they were outside of what is normally considered a gamer. This concept of requirements for gamer identity was important for participants to discuss during the questionnaire process of this current study as well. A second key aspect to the current study was the discussion of stereotypes and nontraditional gamers. Literature such as Chan (2008) and Mou and Peng (2009) discussed multiple instances of how stereotypes affected gamers and determined how one would be treated within the gaming community. Stereotypes are used in the games themselves through the characters players interact with, as well as communication with other players in the community. The discussion of stereotypes was an important aspect of this study because it measured the comfortability of nontraditional gamers within gamer culture, based on the participant's correlation with or distance from a gamer identity. The studies of Shaw (2011), Chan, and Mou and Peng discussed adherence to a gamer identity and how the gaming industry effected these identities, which this study also observes.

Chapter 1 has revealed the purpose of this study and the foundational research of the study at hand. Chapter 2 will discuss the research methodologies used for this study and the data gathering and analysis processes. Chapter 3 details the results of this study's questionnaire data. Chapter 4 will observe the results discussed in chapter 3 through a lens of the research material discussed in chapter 1 in order to reveal how interacting with traditionally gendered video game characters impacts nontraditional gamers, their gender identity and expression. The following research questions are posed:

RQ1: If and how do nontraditional gamers identify themselves as having earned the title of "gamer," and how does gender identity play a role in this identification, if at all?

RQ2: What do nontraditional gamers believe about how video game characters are portrayed within the video game industry and how does gender identity play a role in these beliefs, if at all?

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

The purpose of this study is to reveal how nontraditional gamers determine and identify with gamer status and their subsequent feelings, beliefs, and attitudes on the gendered and sexual portrayal of video game characters throughout the gaming industry and its surrounding communities. Traditional binary views of gender have placed an emphasis on a correlation between masculinity and maleness and between femininity and femaleness. Biological sex and gender identity become inextricably linked and treated as the same. In this study, gender and gender identity are instead defined as socially constructed. Gender and gender identity is influenced, shaped, and limited by socially constructed norms, rules, roles and ideals that are learned and communicated through socialization with others. Gender norms and gender roles are created by social rules and expectations for gender performance that we learn through lived communicative experience. Gender, then, is not synonymous with biological sex but are the meanings human beings give to their sex. In this study the two are treated as different and distinctly separate.

Because the video game industry frequently portrays male characters as universally masculine and female characters as universally feminine, it provides a look at how these characters are symbolically experienced and communicated by those who do not personally adhere to a binary view of gender. The two research questions guiding this study were:

RQ1: If and how do nontraditional gamers identify themselves as having earned the title of "gamer," and how does gender identity play a role in this identification, if at all?

RQ2: What do nontraditional gamers believe about how video game characters are portrayed within the video game industry and how does gender identity play a role in these beliefs, if at all?

The following sections discuss the paradigm that was used to frame this research study, the data collection and the data analysis processes, and the reflexivity behind this study.

<u>Paradigm</u>

A paradigm consists of three concepts that are uniquely defined by their established paradigm: invention, definition, and locus (Fisher, 1985). Invention is the idea of creating the material within the language of the paradigm. Definition is how the material is used in a paradigm. Locus is seen as where the communicative phenomena occurs. Fisher described paradigms as "practices and beliefs of group of research practitioners" (p. 3). Each paradigm uses aspects of communication differently, which affects how people use them. The paradigms themselves are not the solution to our problems or the answers researchers look for, but rather the guides that assist in finding the best solution for our questions. Paradigms are unique in the sense that each one will provide different answers for questions, depending on which paradigm researchers are using (Fisher, 1985). According to Fisher, paradigms help the researcher focus their interests in order to properly phrase research questions.

Additionally, paradigms are broad ways of understanding researchers employ to study the world around us (Tracy, 2013). Tracy described four such paradigms: post-positivist, interpretive, critical, and postmodern, which each contained central ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions (Miller, 2005). Ontology is the focus on being. According to Burrell and Morgan

(1979), for example, scholars that believe in the idea of a hard reality align themselves within a realist ontology. Epistemology concerns the study of knowledge, and how we can "claim what we know" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 21). An example of epistemology is objectivity, or the realists' belief that the hard reality is separate from the human being and we can know this reality through discovery (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 24). Finally, Littlejohn and Foss defined axiology as "the study of values" (p. 33). With axiology, the questions of how the values of the researcher might affect the data are asked (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011; Miller, 2005). An example of an axiological position is the realist's belief in being bias free, or the ability for the researcher to stay objective; keeping their own values and beliefs from interrupting or interfering with the scholarship being studied (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

The paradigm that is used in this study is the interpretive paradigm, which according to Braithwaite and Baxter (2006), is a way to explore multiple realities when observing a single group. Bochner (1985) discussed how the interpretive paradigm can be used to apply meanings to the behavior of humans. These specific interpretations do not directly define what these actions mean to society as a whole, but the participants' beliefs or actions at the time of the study (Bochner, 1985). The ontological position in this study is social constructionism. In social constructionism, the researcher examines how relationships and other aspects of our world are developed and understood through our world and what we see in our realities (Miller, 2005). The epistemological position used in this study is subjectivity, or the position that human beings are not separate from the world they come to know. Hence this position observes the idea of no "universal laws or casual relationships" directing behavior but rather rules, created by the human being with others, guide actions in the world (Miller, 2005, p. 58). Instead of

hoping to learn about relationships or events from a broad and detached objective source, researchers seek to discover information from the specific people they are studying in their contexts (Miller, 2005). Finally, the axiological position of an interpretivist is the idea that researchers cannot separate themselves from their values (Miller, 2005). Because of this, researchers often make observations through a "lens" created by their values, which has potential to influence how the behavior is seen during the project. Despite the knowledge of having these influences, these values are something a researcher cannot avoid bringing to the research nor do they wish for them to be dismissed.

Tracy (2013) discussed how the interpretive paradigm gives us the ability to understand participants' particular beliefs and attitudes, in this case towards the video game industry and the characters they create. Frequently, what we believe about ourselves and society can be heavily influenced by the world around us (Craig, 1999). Because of this, there are thousands of individual ideas and perspectives that can be explored. The goal is not to seek to explain why gamers act the way they do, but rather how they subjectively make sense of or give meaning to their actions with others. Gamers are people with unique stories, backgrounds, and experiences, and looking at gamers through the interpretive paradigm gives us an opportunity to explore a wider spectrum of meaning that expands on the industry's definition of a gamer.

Craig (1999) explained how within the sociocultural tradition, grounded in interpretivism, communication is seen as a "symbolic process that produces and reproduces shared sociocultural patterns" (p. 144). Our opinions and beliefs evolve from the patterns and previously existing ideals that we hold, combined with our social interactions. As one communicates these ideas to others, the belief is reaffirmed within oneself as well (Craig, 1999). The stereotypes and portrayal of

characters within video games are created in and through communication, not merely transported objectively by communication. When gamers interact with other gamers or the industry through the characters in video games, for example, they communicate what makes a gamer and what it means for them to be male and female.

Miller (2005) discussed the "importance of understanding" within social analysis through the interpretive paradigm (p. 53). Theoretical understanding seeks to answer how social life is created by social actors searching for the practical answers or rules for such constructions. Human social actors in a sense create "roadmaps," or the instructions for living, and these roadmaps detail the rules created and used by the social actor (Carey, 2009). Qualitative research enables interpretive scholars to discover these roadmaps, and its tools help the researcher to show, in the language of those studied, how their worlds of meaning are created.

Because the interpretive paradigm allows the researcher to focus on a participant's unique beliefs and viewpoints, it allows us to get a better understanding of the variety of lived experiences. It allows each individual story to be heard and be seen as valid due to the existence of multiple realities. Each participant response is the outcome of their social construction based in their unique lived experiences within the gaming community. These socially constructed views can be seen through the stories and information participants shared within their questionnaires.

Qualitative Research

Tracy (2013) stated that qualitative research is "an umbrella phrase that refers to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of interview, participant

observation and document data in order to understand and describe meanings, relationships, and patterns" (p. 36). The communication studied within this method are personal beliefs, attitudes and feelings collected from participants in their own language. The data collected from these participants reflected their multiple realities, due to each person creating these ideas differently (Miller, 2005). These beliefs and attitudes are created though social construction, which is the idea that everyone interprets communication in their own way due to our own lives and experiences (Fisher, 1985; Miller, 2005; Wood, 2013). While Miller discussed the idea of multiple realities existing among the participants, none of the realities are adherently better or worse than the others. Not only do qualitative studies give researchers the ability to understand how meaning making is occurring within the data, it can also provide an answer as to how things occur (Tracy, 2013). These experiences and personal stories provide researchers with unique perspectives that provide meaning to how certain behaviors or beliefs exist within the world (Miller, 2005).

In this study, qualitative research was used in order to discover and understand participants' particular beliefs and attitudes towards the video game industry and the characters they create. Because nontraditional gamers are people with their own unique stories, backgrounds, and experiences, looking at gamers with qualitative research gives the researcher an opportunity to explore a richer understanding of what a gamer could be from the perspective, in this case, of nontraditional gamers as defined by the researcher. The video game industry has continued to make use of the gender binary in games and characters, and this impacts everyone from the target audience to those who are outside of what they consider to be gamers. However, discovering a large-scale definition of gamer is not the purpose of the study, but instead the goal is to illustrate how nontraditional

gamers create meaning around their gamer identity and around the gender identity construction of games and their characters.

Researcher Point of View

Qualitative research includes the axiological position that the researcher is a part of that which he or she studies. Research values are not separable from the research and the researcher is considered the instrument of analysis because the researcher is responsible for investigating and reporting the meanings found in participant data. Reflexivity is a reality for qualitative researchers and should always be addressed. Researchers must consider their own history with the topic and how it may impact their work (Tracy, 2013). Reflexivity is the collection of observations researchers make based on their experience and their interpretations of the subject matter (Charmaz, 2006). Reflexivity is important to qualitative research due to the researcher's ability to use their research and observations in a way that credibly represents their findings (Charmaz, 2006).

Because I am a gamer, I have my own point of view about this topic, as well as examples of games that have helped me become who I am today. My reason behind this project is to discover if other people have had similar experiences, or if there are other ways to interact with games I have not experienced yet. Over the past 20 years, I have spent countless hours lost in digital worlds, opting to spend time with people constructed of codes and pixels instead of flesh and bone. Because I am very shy, classmates found this amusing, and would constantly remind me of it in the form of teasing and bullying. Video games are a way for me to live my life without the threat of somebody trying to hurt me, emotionally or physically. I have always found it very comforting to come home from a harsh environment and enter a world where I am needed. Without the

players, video game worlds do not exist, so the sense of importance I feel when playing has been addicting. I have had many experiences that have helped make me who I am today because of gaming. There have been many video game characters that have provided inspiration and hope when I was not receiving a lot in the real world.

The first time I began to notice difference in the portrayal of sex and gender was the first time I played *Tomb Raider.* I always thought Lara Croft was strange because of the way she looked. She was well known for her agility and maneuverability, but I honestly thought this was strange, as she has large breasts, a small waist and large hips and thighs, which would more realistically impede such movement. Olympic gymnasts have similar skill sets to Lara, but unlike Lara, they appear to have more realistic body proportions. As I grew up, I started to realize Lara was not alone in this issue. Every female game character I saw was shaped and built in very specific ways, clad in tight and too-small small clothing while they completed missions and played through the game. I have always wondered why all female characters are similar in shape and size. There are a wide variety of sizes when real people are concerned, so why do female video game characters seem to all look and act in the same ways?

I have had many experiences through gaming and within the gaming community that have helped shape my identity into who I am today. I desire to see how these characters can perpetuate particular ideologies, and maintain social hierarchies by classifying a young, White, male traditional gamer. I would easily align within the traditional gamer identity, as a young White male, and even I at times find myself excluded from holding said title. As I get older, I have questioned whether or not I am a gamer due to the differences in philosophies between the industry and myself. I am empathetic to the exclusion of the

nontraditional gamer from the gaming industry, and I am curious as to how nontraditional gamers interpret and are influenced by the rigid definitions, portrayals and depictions of gamers and game characters.

Sampling

To be eligible for this study, participants had to be 18 years or older, be considered a nontraditional gamer, and have experiences with video games. Because the traditional gamer identity has been used to describe straight, young adult male gamers (Soukup, 2007), for the purposes of this study, nontraditional gamers are viewed as participants who played video games and met either one or all of the following criteria: (a) identify as women, (b) older than the industry's idea of a gamer (anyone over the age of 30), (c) homosexual and bisexual participants, and (d) hold transgender and queer gender identities.

Theoretical and convenience sampling were used to recruit participants who fit the criteria through various types of social media (Tracy, 2013). I made posts on Twitter and status updates on Facebook that included a link to the open-ended online questionnaire. Aside from Facebook and Twitter, I shared this study for 4 weeks through a journal entry on my page on the website fimfic.net. I also personally asked friends and family to share and retweet the posts in order to attract a wider participant pool.

Data Collection

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, data for this study were collected, over a period of 4 weeks, using qualitative open-ended questionnaires through Qualtrics. The informed gamer questionnaire consent form can be found in Appendix A. While online questionnaires are still relatively new, it is still a legitimate form of finding data that are worth studying (Gosling, Vazire,

Srivastava, & John, 2004). The data collected through online questionnaires are just as credible, consistent, and diverse enough to qualify as good information compared to more traditional means, such as personal interviews and paper questionnaires (Gosling et al., 2004). The use of online data collection methods in the current study allowed for the collection of data from participants from nine states: California, Washington, Arizona, Ohio, North Carolina, Oregon, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Connecticut. Besides the United States, six other countries were represented: Germany, Canada, Australia, South Korea, Spain, and England. This shows that the gaming industry and their views on traditional gamer identity affects gamers all over the world, not strictly those within the United States.

Seventeen open-ended questions were asked in order to understand the participants' thoughts about the potential influences of video games on their lives and relationships (see Appendix B). The questionnaire was divided into three sections: demographic information, attitudes about gender specific characters and their representations, and influences of game characters in their lives. Demographics, the first portion of the questionnaire, focused on age, race/ethnicity, and gender of the individual. The questions being asked focused on how video games have assisted gamers in the creation of their gender identity. Questions required participants to give examples of video game characters, personality traits, and body proportions that fulfill gender stereotypes. Additional questions were asked in order to learn if video game characters helped these gamers learn about their own identity, as well as how they feel about others. Participants had 1 month to complete and submit the questionnaires. In order to protect their identities, pseudonyms were used when presenting participant narratives.

In total, 74% of the 61 individuals who began the online questionnaire completed it (*N* = 45). Ages of the 45 participants who finished the questionnaire ranged from 18 to 46 years old, with an average age of 28.5. Twenty-one of the participants identified their sex as female, 17 identified as male, two identified as agender [agender is defined as "denoting or relating to a person who does not identify themselves as having a particular gender" ("Agender," 2017), and one identified as transgender female. Eleven of the female participants self-identified as heterosexual, four identified as bisexual, two identified as lesbian, one identified as pansexual, one identified as demisexual (i.e., an individual who only experiences sexual attraction in relationships once a strong bond has been created), and one identified as asexual. The transgender female participant self-identified as lesbian. Five males identified as heterosexual, seven identified as bisexual, two identified as gay, and one identified as pansexual. The asexual participant identified as queer. Thirty-one of the participants identified as White, four as Chinese, three mixed race (East Indian/White, White/Latino, White/Latino/Native American), two identified as Latino, and one identified as Asian.

The term saturation refers to the point when a researcher is no longer gathering new information from data because the information does not change (Charmaz, 2006). I reached saturation because my responses ceased to yield new information at 31 participants. After 32, participants started answering the questions in very similar ways. For example, when asked to describe a typical female character, the responses were variations of busty, sexy, and unintelligent.

After saturation was reached, data were coded and counted in order to gain accurate understanding of the data, but no additional data were collected. Participants reported a variety of experiences with video games, averaging about 20 years of gaming between them, with 25 years of gaming experience being the

most, and just over a year being the lowest. Methods of playing games also varied, with 16% (*n* = 7) using handhelds, 49% (*n* = 22) playing Playstation, 31% (*n* = 14) playing Xbox, 69% (*n* = 31) reported using PCs, 22% (*n* = 10) played mobile phone games, 24% (*n* = 11) reported the Nintendo Wii, and 20% (*n* = 9) reporting miscellaneous gaming systems (this consists of older consoles including Nintendo 64, Sega Genesis, or PC emulators). Sixty-four percent (*n* = 29) of participants responded they played games on at least two different platforms.

Data Analysis

      The data consisted of participants sharing their experiences with video games and their perceptions of the effects they may or may not have had on their lives. From these experiences, explanations about how these processes, actions, and interactions were developed and from these ideas areas for future research can also be identified. Once the data were collected, they were analyzed using a 4-step process discussed in Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). The first step of this process was open coding (Emerson et al., 1995). Open coding consists of reading through the data collected from the questionnaires and looking for information that relates to the research questions (Emerson et al., 1995). During this stage, 31 categories were discovered. Examples of codes that fit with research question 1 were *identity, gamer*, and *time*. Examples of codes that fit research question 2 were *LGBTQ and the industry*, *sexualization*, and *representation.*

      The next step of the data analysis process consisted of initial memoing the data that were open coded (Emerson et al., 1995). In this step, the researcher sorted the data collected and placed them in a specific area, depending on how well the data fit with the particular code. The constant comparative method is the comparing of data in order to refine and collapse categories (Charmaz, 2006;

Tracy, 2013). During this phase of the coding process, if any data were found to be similar to any other data, they were saved together in a new Word document using the constant comparative method. In this stage, 15 initial memos were created by examining the aforementioned data. An example of the codes that were collapsed in order to make the *female/male character appearance* memo were *busty, buff/strong, sexy,* and *limited clothing*. Examples of the memos found for research question 1 were *definitions of gamer, gamer identity,* and *game preferences.* Examples of the memos for research question 2 were *stereotypes, stereotype influence*, and *sexual orientation.*

Focused coding is the third step of the coding process (Emerson et al., 1995). Here each initial memo was reanalyzed with the original themes in mind, in order allow the researcher to make sure they were a good fit for the code discovered earlier (Emerson et al., 1995). Data were then placed into more narrow and specific categories, in order to best reflect how the data fit into the research questions. Any data relating to being a gamer, gamer identity, or definitions of gamer were sorted into a document for research question 1. Any data relating to video game characters' appearance, sexualization, stereotypes, or the impact of these characters were sorted into a document for research question 2. Because the data focused on specific answers, there was very little overlap. In total, seven focused codes were found. Focused codes that fit with research question 1 were *traditional/nontraditional gamer identification, gamer culture*, and *time spent gaming*. Focused codes that fit with research question 2 were including, *LGBTQ character stereotypes, impact of LGBTQ characters* and *male/female stereotypes*.

The final step in the data analysis process was the writing of integrated memos. Emerson et al. (1995) defined this as the point during data analysis when the researcher discovers all the information collected will come together to answer

the research questions. Integrative memos link data together in order to connect ideas and join together data that will become themes (Emerson et al., 1995). Any sub-themes that were gathered from previously discovered codes were organized in this step by determining which codes fit an overarching theme. These overarching themes came together to be larger themes used in the study. Definitions for each code and relevant data excerpts were included in all integrated memos as how they relate to the study's themes. Among the integrated memos for this study that fit with research question 1 were *gamer identity, gaming community,* and *a love of gaming*. The integrated memos that fit with research question 2 were *male/female character design, producing specific characters,* and *character selection*.

The interpretive paradigm was used in this study because of the ability to apply multiple meanings to the behaviors discussed by the participants of this study. Qualitative research was used in this study in order to understand the participants feeling and beliefs towards the video game industry and their characters. The participants of this study were individuals ranging from 18 years old and older, had to be considered a nontraditional gamer (female, member of the LGBTQ community, or over the age of 30) and had to complete an open-ended questionnaire on Qualtrics, which was used to collect the data from this study. These factors allowed for the researcher to find the results to be discussed in chapter 3. The results of the questionnaires mentioned in this chapter found how participants determined their gamer status, their opinions on characters in the gaming industry, and the stereotypes the gaming industry uses within their games. These will be discussed in more depth in chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

In this chapter, the results of this study's questionnaire findings are discussed. The first research question asked participants to discuss whether or not they identified themselves as gamers, and how they arrived at that conclusion. The second research question asked them to focus more on video game characters and share their thoughts on character portrayal and stereotypes. Observations within these research questions were themes relating to character representation, how LGBTQ characters were portrayed in video games, and how stereotypes are seen from the participant's perspective.

<u>Research Question 1</u>

The first research question asked: If and how do nontraditional gamers identify themselves as having earned the title of gamer and how does gender identity play a role in this identification, if at all? Participants identify themselves as either a gamer or a person who games, and each label comes with its own unique requirements and qualifications. It is one thing to simply play games, but in order to be a gamer, the prevailing belief within the gaming community is one must to *earn* the title. Two themes emerged from respondent answers: *The Gamer Identity* and *The Person who Plays Games*. No participant used their gender identity as a reason for whether or not they declared themselves a gamer or person playing the game.

<u>The Gamer Identity</u>

Gamer identity is defined as whether or not participants would self-identify as a gamer versus somebody who just liked playing games. The letter *N* represents the participants who discussed the idea of gamer identity, or those who discussed

their own gamer identity (*N* = 45). Sixty percent of the participants identified themselves as gamers. Their reasons behind this identification went beyond a mere love of playing video games. Gaming can become central to one's identification. For some participants, gaming, gamer culture, and gaming communities play essential roles in self-identity formation. Three subthemes—*For the love of gaming, gaming is who I am,* and *the gaming culture and community*— were present in this theme.

For the love of gaming. Most participants believed the main reason for their identification as gamers was due to their love and affinity for playing games (*n* = 20, 44%). While playing games is not the only factor to this identification, game play is key to the gamer identity. Kitty is one participant that identified as a gamer because of her love of games, saying "I've played video games since I could talk, and they've always been one of my primary passions." Daisy was also very enthusiastic about her feelings about gaming. When asked if she identified as a gamer, she stated "Hell yeah. Love playing games and been playing them forever."

Gaming is who I am. While participants identified as gamers because they loved playing games, others felt the games themselves gave them an identity in the first place. Because they have been gaming for years, they believed gaming had gone beyond a hobby and had actually become a part of them. Robert is a participant who believes that gaming has given him an identity, stating, "I play online games therefore I cannot deny who I am." As gaming becomes central to one's lifestyle, gaming becomes an identity in itself, and creation, negotiation, and evolution of this identity happens through game play. Elizabeth thinks similarly, stating:

I didn't until I gave it some thought but I do identify as a gamer. I grew up during the height of the evolution of gaming systems, gaming played a huge part in the end of my childhood, into my adolescence, and my adult years.

While many identified other reasons for claiming a gamer identity, gameplay was seen as necessary to the formation of gamer identity.

The gaming culture and community. While fewer participants ($n = 7$, 16%) identified as gamers due to culture and community, those who did were just as passionate about this aspect of gaming as those who spoke of loving playing. Players and industry members create a gamer culture through community building, competitive and interactive gameplay, discussions and forums. Gamers often build community through online and multiplayer gameplay, and culture is bred in spaces built for communication surrounding gaming and identification with gaming and gamer identity. These gaming-centric spaces and practices encourage gamer identity, and support identification with and through gameplay. Through these types of outlets, Leslie states, "I feel very connected to gamer culture. It's very easy to make connections with random strangers who also enjoy video games."

Beyond simple gameplay, similar game style interests, discussions, and gatherings work as acts of community building to create connections between players outside of basic gameplay. Rosalind identifies herself as a gamer because "I can talk games with people and have good conversations about them." As gamers connect with other similar gamers, a gaming community is formed, with norms, roles, and expectations that influence who is accepted and included into gamer culture. As Layla states, "it defines me as a person. Ever since I was around 2, I've been playing video games. It's its own culture. Gamers pride themselves on

their gaming rig, their achievements, their characters, and their clique." Besides Layla, many other participants cited the gaming community and social aspects of gaming as reasons for an adoption of the gamer identity.

Communicating with fellow gamers can be just as important a part of gaming as gameplay itself. Sharing experiences with fellow gamers, learning and teaching strategies, and comparing gaming platforms bring individuals together as they build their community. As Rosalind stated above, simply being a gamer can be a conversation starter with other gamers. To this end, when asked if he identified as a gamer, Barney stated, "You bet! Gaming is supposed to about people, regardless of whatever gender, sex, or whatever, coming together and having a good time with each other." Barney's belief that anyone can be a gamer echoes other participants in this study who believe that gaming is adaptable to many personality and lifestyles, and is formative of its own culture and numerous communities.

The "Person" Who Plays Games

Those participants who did not identify as gamers ($n = 15$, 33%) did so because they felt that they did not meet the requirements of being a gamer. These people believe they fail to fit both into the industry's ideals and the expectations of the gaming culture. These ideals and expectations of gaming culture include expectations of time spent gaming and type of games played. Here, participants identified how the amount of time they spent playing games kept them from claiming a gamer identity, as well as their lack of experience with the specific types of games that are seen as foundational for the otherwise ideal gaming experience. Two subthemes were present: *dedication to the game* and *fitting the gamer mold*.

<u>Dedication to the game</u>. A large portion of those who did not identify as gamers do not play games often enough or do not play enough hours per day to call themselves gamers ($n = 10$, 22%). Zach, for example, argues that it has to do with a lack of dedication on his part evidenced by what he does not subscribe to:

> No; it's weird, and maybe I'm being hypocritical here, but to me I think of a gamer as someone who subscribes to the streaming feeds, has Steam, or Xbox live, or the Playstation online option (can't remember the name) - oftentimes I'll go a week, or a few weeks without playing my console, but then I'll play every day for an extended period of time (like when I play an NHL game, I'll play a few games a day to finish up the season). To me, being a gamer is a consistent part of who you are - and while I love playing my 360, I'm just not as dedicated to be considered a gamer.

Zach may love to play; however, he does not claim gamer status because he is not a time-dedicated gamer, meaning that he would have to play uninterrupted for weeks at a time to consider gaming a part of his identity. For Zach, dedication means a time commitment to games. A person who takes weeks or months off in between sessions is not a gamer in his opinion because they should be playing frequently within that time frame.

Toby loves playing games frequently as well, yet struggles calling himself a gamer due to the breadth (i.e., large variety of games) and depth (i.e., number of hours) of gameplay that seems a requirement of the title:

> I did until recently. Gaming was a very influential part of my life growing up, through the myriad of RPGs I played in my K-12 days, and MMOs in my college years. Nowadays, I still do have an MMO subscription, and I still play Steam games, so consciously I recognize that I play significantly more than the average non-gamer. At the same token, I also recognize that

the stereotypical gamer (or myself in my college years) plays many more games and many more hours per week than I do, and for this reason I don't consider myself "hardcore" enough to be a gamer. Nonetheless I still actively enjoy them and play them as my time permits.

Toby touches on the idea that he plays games much more than an individual who does not play games, but not enough to earn the title of "gamer." Participants' definition of *gamer* is often influenced by the number of games played, types of games played, and overall time dedicated to gaming. Willow too believes one cannot be a gamer unless a large amount of time is spent on gameplay, stating "Naw, I don't play enough or have enough appreciation for gaming/games/whatnot. Also, I'm too broke to get invested in gaming."

Just like a title or achievement one would earn though gameplay, participants offer the criteria by which one unlocks the title of *gamer*. Playing the games and enjoying the play are not enough, however. Players believe that one earns the title through several qualifications: the amount of time spent playing should take precedent over time spent doing other activities, the variety and volume of games played can either help or hurt your gaming status, and one should own a variety of gaming platforms and hold a willingness to spend money on games and gaming equipment. Above, Willow refuses to adhere to the label of gamer, because she does not believe she fits the above criteria, thus expressing that she does not have enough dedication to gaming, marked by appreciation for gaming, or appreciation of the gaming title.

Fitting the gamer mold. Like with most technology, gaming is constantly changing; developing and evolving at a pace that many in the community cannot keep up with. Some gamers simply cannot, or don't wish to, constantly replace

and upgrade gaming systems or purchase new games and downloadable content. Other individuals prefer to stick to games, styles, and themes they enjoy playing, and may avoid games that do not appeal to them in style or platform. These individuals believe that because they do not keep up with the latest trends or games that are on the market, they are not considered gamers ($n = 5$, 11%). Amy argues that since she does not keep up with the most recent releases she is not a gamer:

> No, there are a lot of 'pivotal' games I haven't played (i.e., Any *Legend of Zelda* game) and I don't really keep up with new games or get excited about most game launches. Since I don't do any of that most "real" gamers would think of me as a huckster or fraud. I don't mind talking about games, but I don't talk about games in front of friends that don't also play games.

While Amy does admit to playing games roughly 1-3 hours a night she does not stick to the newest consoles and games available. She also has no interest in new releases nor does she follow the promotion and news about what games will be coming soon. Thus, Amy is unsure as to whether or not to call herself a gamer, solely because "real gamers," or those who fit the industry stereotypes, would see her situation differently.

Jessie too, does not refer to herself as a gamer due to her self-comparison to what a gamer looks and acts like. She states, "gamers usually stick to one format type or one game in general. I jump around to all types whether its arcade play, puzzles, first person RPG, or shooting games." Like Amy, Jessie states that she averages around 20 hours a week playing games, but because she believes she does not fit the mold of what game developers are looking for, she does not feel comfortable identifying as a gamer.

Further discussion for what it means to be a gamer was provided by those who did not see themselves as a gamer. Nontraditional gamers were able to distinguish between gamer and the person who only plays the game and use that criteria to influence their own labels. Those who love gaming and act like members of gaming culture and community hold the gamer title. By their standards, one must be dedicated to gaming and fit the mold of a gamer. Simply speaking, those who declined to refer to themselves as gamers expressed that they did so because to acquire the title is nuanced and requires more than the simple playing of games. The title of gamer, as outlined by participants, requires players to move beyond gameplay and requires the dedication of time, resources, and the appreciation for games and gamer culture. No nontraditional gamer indicated that gender identity is a criterion for the gamer identity; that is, no one indicated that to be a gamer you had to be or act masculine or feminine. This is interesting because there certainly is the perception that traditional gamers are stereotyped as young, heterosexual and male. Gender identity does however emerge in response to the second research question.

The first research question asks nontraditional gamers how and if they hold an identification as a gamer and whether gender identity matters to this designation. Research question 2 moves to ask about the feelings, thoughts, interpretations and beliefs of those nontraditional gamers surrounding characters within games and whether their gender identity matters.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked: What do nontraditional gamers believe about how video game characters are portrayed within the video game industry and how does gender identity play a role in these beliefs, if at all? Nontraditional

gamers described how they observed characters of various sexes, genders and sexual orientations being represented within games. Five themes were discovered for this research question: *Nontraditional Character Presentation: Does Sex Matter?; LGBTQ Characters in the Industry; Stereotypes of Video Game Characters; Male and Female Character Roles in Games*; and *Stereotype Consumption and Gamers.* The letter *n* inside parenthesis demonstrates the number of times the theme occurred within the data while the percentages show how many participants were represented.

Nontraditional Character Presentation:
    Does Sex Matter?

Nontraditional characters refer to characters that represent the nontraditional gamer (e.g., females, LGBTQ, older, etc.). The *N* represents the number of times participants discussed the lack of quality nontraditional characters in existence, the flaws in existing ones, and how the gaming industry should approach the creation of these figures differently than they approach standard male characters *(N = 67).*

Nontraditional gamers discussed how important sex was to character selection (*n* = 26, 39%). Five participants (two bisexual males and one homosexual male under the age of 30, one heterosexual male over the age of 30, and one heterosexual female under the age of 30) preferred playing as male characters because it was what they are used to seeing and the norm within gaming. Participants note the interpretation that males can transition to every type of environment seamlessly, and thus not taking away from the gaming experience. Sixteen participants (eight females, six males, and two agender individuals) preferred playing as a female character. All female participants that preferred to play a female wanted to because they identified in similar terms. Kitty shares this

belief saying, "Female; I'd rather play as someone who I feel is more representative of my identity, when given the choice." Hence, female participants often chose characters that expressed feminine traits, which were often viewed as exclusively female. The only female who mentioned a chance of playing as a male character was Jackie, who only wants to play as a female character if they are portrayed as having masculine characteristics such as being powerful, strong, and capable:

> I preferably like to play as female characters, but there are exceptions. I want women to have a dominant role than man since I am a believer in the power of the women. I don't want to follow the stereotypes of women being weaker than man.

The male nontraditional gamers (two bisexual, one gay, and three males above the age of 30) that preferred to play as females did so not because of sexual needs or desires, but because the gamers found female characters more entertaining to engage with during gameplay. A recurring theme among these males is the idea that female characters are somewhat rare; to play as one is a treat because they felt they were very well made. For example, Booker has an issue with hypermasculine characters and finds them "somewhat frustrating." He, along with seven other male participants believed the female characters had better voice acting and mannerisms than their male counterparts. Toby shares his opinion that despite being a male, playing as female characters is just more exciting, stating that perceptions of strength in female roles were seen as more unique:

> Generally female. Aesthetic appeal is one thing, but I personally feel that there's something exciting about playing as a strong female protagonist. Perhaps it's just that strong female protagonists are still rare so this is a feeling of novelty, or perhaps there's just a sense of beauty in a female

protag stepping toe-to-toe with the ferocious dragon and slaying it with a
well-timed strike. In addition, there is a role play appeal to this as well. I
have been a male my entire life, and will continue to be one. So when a
game offers me the choice to be something I've always been, or to be
something I've never been, the latter is generally more appealing.

Toby's response indicates that there are benefits to playing as an identity that you do not claim; it can be exciting and unique, and role reversal is appealing. There was also a learning experience involved with playing as the other. Kelso believes playing as a female character "expands my worldview a bit through experiencing the way females are treated." Geoff, too, believes this, stating:

As a general rule, when I play the type of open world game that allows
maximum player freedom I prefer to play a female character. It allows a
level of cognitive dissonance, the generic male action hero stereotype
doesn't appeal to me, so playing a female character allows me to step
outside of myself and play a character who doesn't view the world like I do
IRL [in real life]. When I do not have a choice in character creation I seem
to have a harder time with buy in, only a few games have made me feel like
I am creating a story instead of experiencing it. Link from *Twilight
Princess* and Lara from the classic *Tomb Raider* series are the rare
exception.

As Geoff states, playing with characters he creates gives him a more thorough gaming experience. With this, Geoff is creating the world he is playing in. He decides what the characters look like, their roles in society, and their mannerisms. Essentially, he has the opportunity to write the rules for his own world and finds this to be easier done when playing as a female character. When playing with characters created by a developer, someone else determines what can

occur within the confines of the game. It is someone else's world, and thus players have to abide by the rules they set in place. While few games give gamers the opportunity to create a world from the ground up, many allow the players to help form a world according to developer templates. They are not looking for a character they can identify with, instead, they simply want the character that will provide the best gameplay experience.

Six of the participants (4 female, 2 male) believed a character's sex ultimately did not matter, citing the importance of the character's background and development as the reason behind selection *(n = 6, 0.09%)*. Barney said "doesn't matter what they are, but *who* they are. How it compels the story forward." If the character makes the immersion and overall experience of the game better for the gamer, then that character should be chosen. Players who deemed the sex of the character as unimportant did not see the character's sex as an integral part of the character's being. For some, choosing a character is more difficult due to issues with how the character is represented. Gavin holds no preference to a character's sex, as long as the characters are not sexually exaggerated or overtly sexualized. Often, it is female characters that are hypersexualized, while male characters are hypermasculine. Female characters are often portrayed as sexual objects for male consumption. Thus, when this is perceived, Gavin states that he will almost exclusively choose male characters because "I don't like being confronted with casual sexuality while playing games and the sexuality of male characters is not as pronounced." For this participant, it wasn't an issue of sex, it was the issue of how that sex is portrayed.

Nontraditional gamers discussed how important the sex of a character was when it came to character selection. Some male nontraditional gamers found male characters to be the preferred sex, because male characters were seen as the norm.

Female characters were the preferred sex of both male and female nontraditional participants. Female participants select female characters in order to play a character more similar to them. Male participants select female characters for a variety of reasons. First, because these characters are not the norm in games, participants found them to create a fun opportunity to try something new. Other males believe female characters allow them to take a break from the hypermasculine male character that is seen consistently throughout gaming. Additionally, male nontraditional gamers enjoy the role-playing aspects of playing as female characters and appreciate the different perspective it gives. Playing these characters allows male nontraditional gamers some control over the rules of the game rather than simply following the developers' rules. Those who viewed a character's sex as a nonissue selected characters strictly on who would provide the best overall experience for them. Since sex factors into which character a player may select, some wonder if sexual orientation will soon be another option to decide upon.

LGBTQ Characters in the Gaming
 Industry

Discussion of LGBTQ characters appeared in multiple comments about character selection and their future in gaming. Many games, such as *Mass Effect*, *Skyrim,* and *Saints Row 4,* allow you to have certain romantic and sexual situations, such as marriage or implied sexual intercourse with same sex characters, but the characters in these games are one the player creates from scratch. There is no preestablished backstory or any identity that comes along with the character because the player creates one themselves. As of this study, there have been very few major, mainstream video games developed or released in which a main or major character claims an LGBTQ identity. Those characters that

do openly hold an LGBTQ identity are all too often minor characters or nonplayable characters built into the games overall plot. Four subthemes: *playing as LGBTQ characters, creation of LGBTQ characters,* and *future of LGBTQ characters* were found during this analysis.

Playing as LGBTQ characters. When asked if they would ever play as a LGBTQ character in a game without the option of playing as a heterosexual character, 69% of total 45 participants said they would ($N = 31$). Buffy was one of those individuals who would play as a LGBTQ character, "Yes, I would play it because love interests are hardly ever a major element of a story so I don't think it would change the gaming experience." Forty percent of those individuals who said yes shared Buffy's opinion that sexual orientation is not an issue in a game because they believed sexual orientation should not be the focus of the game. Some of these participants ($n = 17, 55\%$) are skeptical of this, due to the difficulty of respectfully representing the LGBTQ community. Participants often expressed a conflation between character sexual orientation and character romantic interest and performance.

Kelso, a participant that identifies as a member of the LGBTQ community, would love the opportunity to play as a character he can truly identify with, and has some of those reservations as to the realism of an LGBTQ character:

> Yes, of course! As someone with those characteristics myself it would be quite rewarding. Bring 'em on! And please, don't make it the core of their being. Gender and sexual identity are important, but having that be a constant source of tension / discussion /focus can end up demeaning the person as a whole. People are more than their gender and sexual identity, and that's important to remember.

Here, Kelso expresses that while his own sexual orientation is important to his identity, it is not, and should not, be the only important aspect of an LGBTQ character. Members of the LGBTQ community are average, regular people leading average, regular lives the same way people of all identities do, but stereotyping can lead to a portrayal of the LGBTQ community as nothing more than an oppressed minority, over-emphasizing the importance of the minority identity; in this case, their sexual orientation. It should be noted that none of the participants said they would not play as LGBTQ characters because of their sexual orientation, but instead expressed they would not play as LGBTQ characters because they did not trust the game creators to properly create a character that represented the LGBTQ community ($n = 3$, 10%). Jessie believes that by having a character that was a gay male or lesbian, something would be taken away from the gameplay, severely limiting what a player can do, stating that "if you choose a sexual orientation in the beginning it limits the type of decisions or influences you can make." This, of course, is not necessarily true, but the belief that a secured sexual orientation may somehow limit gameplay influences Jessie's ability to envision gameplay as an LGBTQ character. This may stem from Jessie's own heterosexual identification. Alternatively, those who said yes also had plenty of reservations about the developer's ability to properly create characters that were not defined by their sexuality or sexual behavior.

Creation of LGBTQ characters. In total, 33 participants discussed LGBTQ characters in games, and of those, 18 (55%) had major concerns with the gaming industry being able to create characters that did not play to heavily established stereotypes that are currently displayed in our culture. These participants do not think developers in video game companies could manage such a feat. Griffin

explains how these individuals prioritize how important character sexuality is when selecting a character:

> Are they gay/lesbian/bisexual etc. and that is their only defining trait that they parrot routinely and every conversation they have brings this fact up the same way one displays a large diamond or a tumor? Then no, I probably wouldn't. I'd find the character to be strange and awkward. Overly fixated on that should not be a major issue. If the character has this trait alongside many others? Then I'd be more interested. Understanding the struggle such people go through is meaningful, but they are still normal people with normal (or fantastical) everyday lives and adventures.

According to Griffin, if the characters happen to be a member of the LGBTQ community and it is their only character trait, then it would be a horrible character very few would want to use. While sexuality and sexual behavior is not the entire focus of real humans, it becomes the most important part of the character when we allow the character to be boiled down to their sexual stereotypes. Jessie also believes a large focus on sexual identity and even on gender is potentially harmful because "having that be a constant source of tension/discussion/focus can end up demeaning the person as a whole. People are more than their gender and sexual identity, and that's important to remember." Nontraditional gamers worried that harmful stereotypes would plague the LGBTQ characters and expressed feelings of dislike towards the over sexualization of male and female characters. Interestingly, the participants' issue with LGBTQ characters and the sexualization of male and female characters both stem from the belief that these concepts do not define a character. Participants believed there was more to a person than their physical appearance or sexual orientation. These

feelings have many participants questioning what could be in store for the LGBTQ community in the future of gaming.

Future of LGBTQ characters in games. With this kind of focus on a character's sexual orientation and sexual behavior, it could lead to harmful perpetuation of the stereotypes that plague members of the LGBTQ community. However, if a character who was a member of this group was portrayed appropriately, would they make a difference to the gaming industry, the gamers, and society at large? Various responses discussed how LGBTQ characters could potentially impact the gaming industry and gamers, both traditional and nontraditional, as a whole ($n = 19$, 57%).

Twenty percent of the participants believe the inclusion of more LGBTQ characters would be a great addition to the gaming world ($n = 9$, 20%). Kitty explains that it would give traditional gamers "more points of view to experience, see, and generally embrace." Donna added that "gamers would be able to see sexual orientation in a new light as opposed to the standard male/female roles." There is an agreement among all these participants that the first few games with LGBTQ characters will cause issues at first, due to strong resistance from traditional gamers: Kelso expressed this, stating:

> There would be an initial backlash from the narrow-minded, bigoted, entitled crowd who don't seem to have anything better to do than complain if their worldview is disturbed in any fashion. But ultimately (if the game was any good) I think that the more LGBTQ+ characters we see, the better it will be for the world. We exist, we play games, we fight and love and want to go on quests... and we want to be represented in the games we play.

In this study, 47% of participants identified themselves as a member of the LGBTQ community. Some of those individuals expressed the belief that the gaming industry should simply remain the way it has always been in order to avoid a negative portrayal of the LGBTQ community and confusion surrounding LGBTQ identities and individuals. This could influence the gaming industry to remain hypermasculine and heteronormative. Eighty-one percent of total participants believe that while it would be a large shock to mainstream gamer culture initially, it will become normalized over time and we will see large roles filled with characters that portray various sex and gender identifications.

While the thought of LGBTQ characters sounds like a great idea to some participants, others fear it would make the gaming industry a more detrimental place for the LGBTQ community by increasing the negative or stereotypical portrayal of LGBTQ identities, or that they might have very little change on the industry ($n = 8$, 42%). These participants who see no change occurring are not thrilled about the lack of alteration; instead, they appear to be dejected. Lela believes the industry will never do anything about this issue:

> The industry's so far from supporting sexualities other than straight male that it's hard to say. (Actual quote from a publisher regarding *Remember Me's* straight female protagonist: "You can't have a dude like the player kiss another dude. That would feel awkward.") I imagine a lot of backlash from the anti-PC crowd, complete with rape threats and more developers leaving the industry.

Lela is not the only one with these thoughts; Melina said, "part of me also feels that people will not take it well depending on their beliefs and if they accept different sexual orientations." Because traditional gamers seem to be stuck in their ways, some nontraditional gamers believe that the options of having a LGBTQ

character in games is the best that will happen for the time being. Eighty-one percent of total participants believed that in time, the gaming industry would do more to promote games with LGBTQ characters. Seventy-four percent of participants would have no problem playing as an LGBTQ character because sexual orientation is often not seen as a key component to a game, but 55% of those same participants questioned whether it could be done in a way that is respectful to the LGBTQ community. Stereotyping is not something that exists solely within the creation of LGBTQ characters. Heterosexual characters are frequently stereotyped and displayed in heteronormative and often hypersexualized ways.

Stereotypes of Video Game
 Characters

The most prevalent stereotypes of male and female video game characters among participant responses was character appearances and the objectification of female characters. Here, *n* represents the number of participants who mentioned negative perceptions towards character appearance and the roles performed by various genders (*n* = 33, 73%). Two subthemes were found*: Female and male character appearance* and *objectification of female characters.*

Female and male character appearance. How both female and male characters are created and displayed was an issue with 70% of these participants. Character appearance dictates how nontraditional gamers explain the design of male and female characters. The participants discuss how the characters are dressed, as well as their physical features. The description of female appearance in video games was seen as sexual by 22% of participants (*n* = 10, 22%). The sexual

appearance was broken into two categories: body type ($n = 8$, 18%) and clothing or lack thereof ($n = 2$, 4%).

Participants noted that the portrayals of female characters were more about their bodies than anything else. For example, Jessie's take on how women are displayed shows they are:

> Usually tall and slender, large breasts, and more defined features...what I would describe as somewhat of a bimbo. I think female video game characters look this way to appeal to male players. The video game designers create a beautiful, flawless woman that could easily destroy you. It is perceived as being attractive.

Participants also discussed the lack of clothing and the absence of substantial armor on female characters. Daisy felt women in video games are "scantily clad in impractical armor. Object of sexual or romantic desire."

While 22% of participants saw gamer character hypersexuality as a large problem, others did not see it that way. Kitty believes "There's nothing wrong with them in moderation, but the industry would benefit from more like Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite* or even the *Dark Souls* protagonists who are as much blank slates as their male counterparts are." While other participants shared Kitty's opinion, the fact that female characters are sexualized so frequently is very frustrating. Some participants, such as Kelso, believed this was due to these characters being created for consumption by the gaming target audience: heterosexual men.

For male characters, the belief among participants was that male video game characters were physically fit ($n = 13$; 29%). Kitty describes the stereotypical male character as "confident, in-control, physically fit, basically your action-movie star. Often stoic and relatively silent." The reasons for these

muscular characters are due to the popularity of some genres of games, especially the first-person shooter (FPS). These games are quite popular with gamers, due in part to their action-movie feel (Gray, 2014). Kelso shares his opinion as to why male characters are displayed this way:

> Strong; either cocky or unsure (usually little in between), uncomplicated in thought, motive, and emotion (at least at first), and White (alas). Why? Because that's how video games are typically marketed: to young White (or accepting of White avatars) males. It's WAY overdue for a change, in my view.

> Kelso also mentioned another aspect of male character appearance; most characters appear to be White. Multiple participants *(n = 3, 7%)* mentioned this was a common trait in male video games characters, most likely due to the audience the developers are trying to reach their target audience (Soukup, 2007).

> The stereotypes that participants discussed for female character portrayal in video games were the over-sexualization and hyper-feminization of female characters. From sexy outfits to hypersexualized body types, these stereotypes lead to objectification of these characters. Male characters were discussed as well, discussing their towering physiques and Whiteness as a frequent occurrence in games. Stereotypes perpetuate beliefs of what a character is or is not capable of, reinforcing the nontraditional gamer expectations about the specific roles male and female characters should play in the games, as well as how they feel about these roles.

> Objectification of female characters. Respondents were not shy about how these stereotyped female characters encouraged gendered beliefs before, during, and after gameplay. Participants believed the portrayals of female characters were

objectifying women ($n = 10$; 22%). Many participants think that female characters are created this way in order to portray what is to be seen as a perfect-looking woman. When asked how these characters affected the way she interpreted her body, Griffon responded "mainly insecure and uncomfortable when I let it get to me. It's implying I'm not living up to some impossible standard."

Multiple participants expressed the idea that female characters are not created with female gamers in mind. Kelso explains:

> Not wearing enough protective gear or having natural anatomy. Way too fascinated by the male characters - as if they were defined by their attraction to men: either highly emotional or stone cold /distant. All of them are unreasonably gorgeous and frighteningly fit. Why? Because of what was mentioned above: the target audience of young males. And again, WAY overdue for change.

Gender Roles in Games

Nontraditional gamers reported that they believe male and female characters each have a specific purpose in video games. Male characters are supposed to be the hero, regardless of how they look or act in most scenarios. With females, it is not as straight forward, as the heroic females often play support roles for male characters or require help from male characters in order to move through the games plot. The letter *n* portrays how many participants believed the gender role a character plays is predetermined by their sex ($n = 11$). The subthemes *female character roles* and *male character roles* were found in this theme.

Female character roles. When participants described the manner in which female characters were shown in a particular role in a game, they referred to the

limited roles the female had in the gaming world. In-game female characters are rarely seen at all as a main character. When they were seen as a character, their roles were not seen as a hero, instead they were seen as a prize that needed to be retrieved by the male hero. Female characters tend to be accessories, awards, or damsels in distress to male main characters. For example, Lela said that female characters are often "Timid to the point of near-helplessness. Often protected by stronger male characters," and that the female character in video games "Doesn't get to do much." Kelso echoes this statement, wondering how some of the developers really view women and their achievements in the real world:

> Like too many game writers have low opinions of women, and/or don't actually look around (or consult women) at how the world really works for them before writing them into a game. Also, like the only way to be beautiful as a woman is big tits, a wasp waist, makeup, long hair, and fawning toward men. Too narrow a definition by far.

When there is an opportunity for a female to be a main character, these characters are often seen as sexual or sexualized objects for masculine characters to completely control. While the gaming industry occasionally writes female characters that are capable of completing the missions and solving the tasks at hand, they are more often than not highly sexualized. Rosalind believes the type of female character that gamers will play as is dependent on the type of game they are playing. "It varies; you tend to either have Samus Aran or Lara Croft types who are the 'sexy, deadly bombshell' sort, or else you get more of the Zelda/Peach type who exist to be kidnapped/otherwise in need of rescue." This sets up a false dichotomy reinforcing women's portrayal in video games as hypersexualized or traditionally feminine.

Male players, on the other hand, can more commonly find variety in type of male characters to play, featuring an array of masculine characteristics. While hegemonic masculinity heavily influences most male characters (Gray, 2014), players that do not like traditional, masculine, muscular and heroic characters are more likely to be able to find alternatives to that character than their female counterparts. While most male characters are defined as overly aggressive and hypermasculine, there are some alternatives to please players who are looking for a different experience. For example, Nathan Drake of the *Uncharted* series chooses to use his brain over brawn and to solve puzzles, choosing to only use weapons to defend himself. Female gamers are not as lucky in this regard, because there is not much variety in their characters. Like most participants, Lilly is aware of this lack of diversity, yet still chooses to game regularly because she just wants to play:

> I just roll my eye, but move on because I want to play the game. It kinda makes me sad. It usually makes me even sadder when I finally see an Asian female character in the game, but she's hypersexualized or stereotyped.

She knows that while the hegemonic femininity and lack of diversity is harmful to audiences, to choose to not play due to this lack of diversity may result in not being able to play at all, because these issues are so prevalent in mainstream gaming. If players were to avoid entire games, genres, or series due to their hypersexualization of the female form, very few games would be left to play.

Male character roles. While it was mentioned above that male players can find a greater variety of masculine characteristics with male characters compared to female payers, the most common belief toward male characters was an understanding or acceptance of their traditionally, overly masculine physical

appearance ($n = 5$, 11%). Donna stated, "they make sense; the hero of a game should be masculine and heroic," which echoes 31% of the overall opinions of the agreeing participants. While they are not for or against this type of character, they believe that the character makes sense because of the environment of the game. In order to be a hero, you need to be able to look and act like you can survive. While overly muscular and masculine characters may be found as stereotypical or dangerously hegemonic, they are also the people you would expect to be found in a warzone, triumphing over villains, and saving the day.

A common feeling expressed by the participants was their sense of boredom toward these traditional and hypermasculine male character roles ($n = 3$, 7%). Boredom emerges from the constant and repeated use of these same kinds of characters and gets in the way of being excited during game play. Games are meant to excite and intrigue, but Griffon, bored with these characters, mentions that "there's nothing bad about them, per se, but they do get overused. It can get tiresome always seeing the same character over and over." Boredom and frustration are also present as action games dominate the sales market, as they did in 2015 (ESA, 2015).

While these games were by far the best selling, this does not mean every gamer plays them. Action games often rely on the presence of traditionally masculine bodies, which can alienate and frustrate players that dislike these character types. Geoff expressed feeling annoyed because his gamer identity is called into question because of a dislike toward action-oriented games:

> Like somehow as a male gamer I am not worthy if I do not play these uber
> popular games and play at the highest level. Like somehow as a male
> gamer I am expected to be more interested in 360 no scopes rather than a
> fascinating story and character consequence.

Not only are video game characters being stereotyped, but often the gamers themselves will be placed into categories and types. Like Geoff mentioned above, because he favors a more complex storyline over action and violence, in the eyes of the larger gaming community, this makes him less of a gamer because he does not play or stay involved in what is currently popular. Unfortunately, it is obvious that being a gamer is not as easy as simply being someone who enjoys playing video games as noted above in the discussion of research question 1. Due to the video game industry's target audience (Soukup, 2007), many people who play games regularly believe as if they are not gamers simply because they fall outside of the desired audience.

Roles for female characters to play were extremely limited and rare compared to the male roles. These roles were very sheltered and usually required male assistance for success. Even on the off chance they had some power in a main role, they were highly sexualized. The male roles typically were heroes with the requisite of physical prowess. Ironically, while the nontraditional gamers note the variety of roles for male characters they expressed a monotony of reoccurring similarly hypermasculine characters in mainstream games. These stereotyped roles are usually found in very popular games, which allow gamers who do not enjoy these types of games to have their identity called into question by other players. As players view the same stereotypical messages and identities over and over, they run risk of allowing stereotypes to affect themselves and their thoughts.

Stereotype Consumption and Gamers

Stereotypes in video games are something many have grown to expect from their favorite games. The nontraditional gamers in this study shared concern for future generations of gamers for the way gender identities are constructed through

game characteristics, compared to how people actually behave in reality. Participants discussed how the promotion of stereotypes in video game characters can impact gamers' behavior and perceptions toward people *(n = 27)*. The subthemes, *impact on traditional gamers* and *impact on nontraditional gamers* were found in this theme.

Impact on traditional gamers. Nontraditional gamers in this study mostly believed that stereotypical characters, especially female characters, have an impact on traditional male gamers *(n = 25, 55%)*. Donna argues that as traditional male gamers consistently see these stereotypical female characters, "they tend to begin to think of those female characters as normal. It influences the way they see females in everyday life." Stereotypical female characters, according to these participants have the potential to cause a lot of problems for male gamers, especially those who are younger. Jackie believed many of these stereotypes assisted male traditional gamers into seeing females as things instead of people:

> Yes, some games would sexualize woman with having big chests and having a body with nice curves. This would make women more like commodities than actual people. Most companies do this to appeal the male audience. This sort of things enforces men's expectations of women and enforces the stereotypes as they expect women to beautiful with those features.

Jackie's comment mirrors the idea of some companies using images of desirable women as a way to gather male interest. Miller and Summers (2007) explained the video game industry is no different than other business. Popular gaming magazines have plenty of appealing women promoting one game or another, but the difference is most of those women are created by an artist in a

studio, instead of through genetics. Since the models are not real, it is easier to distort their looks and behavior, creating the perfect virtual women Kennedy (2002) discussed, which could lead to confusion among young players of all sexes.

Negatively influencing the younger generation is always a concern for members of society. Participants were not overly concerned with the harm sexualized female characters could cause for adults, but rather male children and teens within the target audience of the game industry. Many agreed *(n = 21, 47%)* that having a standard for what women looked like was bad, having a standard for how they acted was just as bad, if not worse. Kelso believes the unrealistic characters acting helpless is just as bad as expecting unrealistic characters should look a certain way:

> Any unrealistic character can influence behavior, and given how women are treated in 'real life' all too often, the over-sexualized, under-capable, and physically aberrant (seriously, the number of women that look anything like most female video game characters is tiny at best) female characters in far too many games set up - at the very least - improbable expectations and beliefs about what women are (or should be) like.

While 29 participants agree with Daisy that these female characters "contribute to the male culture of entitlement and privilege," those same participants believed once these adolescent gamers socialized and grew into adulthood, they would learn the differences between digital world and the one they were living in. While Marshall believes video games can be the cause of a lot of issues as far as creating societal expectations, he also believes spending time in the outside world is a great way to make sure those kinds of beliefs do not get perpetuated:

I believe that the easily impressed will continue to be easily impressed, and people who do not really understand how the world works can get the wrong impression of how females actually are in real life due to their relatively unrealistic portrayal in games. But at the same time, these are the same people who also are influenced to believe that most unrealistic portrayals of everything in games are mirrors of reality. However, the ones who have spent more time in this world ought to be able to distinguish what is real and what isn't.

The idea of video games creating social problems for traditional gamers is a very real concern. While they are the target audience developers seek to attract, young males are not the only gamers at risk or creating false perceptions on society based from experiencing hypersexuality in gaming. The fear is that the stereotypes in video game characters have the potential to create unrealistic body expectations for females, as well as help push the narratives females need males to help them in most aspects of their lives (Kennedy, 2002).

Impact on nontraditional gamers. Many female characters are created for the amusement of male gamers (Mao & Peng, 2009). There were numerous responses explaining why and how these characters would affect other female gamers ($n = 19$). Some of these responses include Lela, "frustrated. I question why I'm even playing as this person if she's not going to accomplish anything" and Melina "yes, since female characters are sexualized they can get an unrealistic image of the female aesthetic."

Various participants believed there was a large opportunity for video games to impact young females in a negative light ($n = 12$, 27%). Griffon believes one of

the reasons there are not as many females in gaming is because of the way the females are portrayed:

> I think they can. I think a lot of females are turned off many mainstream games because they are not represented well. That said, this isn't a subject I've done much research into, so I'm not confident stating one way or the other. The impression I get is that many females feel underrepresented and when there are female characters they are either unrelatable or oversexualized.

Social play with others is another area of influence mentioned by participants. Jessie makes the point of believing the influence does not lie within single player experiences, but through online play with other players; mostly males. "Yes and no. If the female gamer is playing with real people then yes because men will treat her differently and the game play will be different. If she is playing with just invited people or local then no." Lela adds, "their biggest impact is probably what games certain women refuse to play. I've definitely seen pushback against games like *Dragon's Crown*, which is a good example of what women are starting to do in order to start influencing change."

Those who think there is no possibility of impacting the lives of nontraditional gamers argue the responsibility lies on the player to understand the difference between reality and video games ($n = 4, 9\%$). Buffy believes there is no impact because "I know for myself I know that most of those things are inaccurate so I don't take any of it to heart." Kelly mirrors this perspective, adding younger gamers playing games have the opportunity to do something positive with their gaming experience, so "we should just make them positive and a positive experience while we're at it."

This theme observed the potential impact gender stereotypes can have on both traditional and nontraditional gamers. Participants discussed how they believe the constant exposure to stereotypical female characters could lead to males creating unrealistic expectations when it comes to females. A bigger concern than males already within the industry's target audience are younger males who are starting to discover gaming. The current standards for female characters allowed participants to express worry over the continued spread of stereotypes. Participants also discussed the impact stereotyped female characters can have on nontraditional gamers. Many found when playing as stereotyped characters that these depictions were frustrating as well as influential to young females. Participants believed multiplayer experiences were more likely to lead to negative impacts, but felt it was the player's duty to acknowledge the stereotypes and understand the difference between video games and reality.

The key findings in this chapter can be broken down into two sections: each one reflecting a research question. Research question 1 observed participants discussing what it means to be a "gamer." Those who identified as a gamer felt it was for the love of gaming. It is not just hobby or leisure activity, but a dedication to the game, a part of their identity, and membership in a community with similar cultural values. The participants who did not identify as "gamers" still reported they love playing games, but the games did not define who they were. To fit the label of a gamer these nontraditional gamers thought there must be a dedication to a time requirement. While there is nothing wrong with playing games periodically, participants believed a person had to be more dedicated to gaming to be considered a gamer. Nontraditional gamers also discussed not fitting the gamer mold as a reason for not being able to define themselves as a gamer. These participants believed, despite their love of gaming, they could not claim the

identity because they kept away from newer consoles or games. The reasons ranged from newer devices costing too much, to having no desire to try anything new, to preferring to stick with the classics. There were no participants that believed they were not gamers due to their gender identity.

Research question 2 yielded several findings with respect to how nontraditional gamers thought and felt about how video game characters are portrayed in the games in relation to character sex and gender. The first key finding was the importance of sex in character selection. Participants discussed the role sex played in selecting characters, and it was found that female characters were the most popular choice by both male and female nontraditional gamers in this study. The reason why females selected female characters was due to wanting to play with a character that was familiar, while the males who preferred playing as women wished to see a game from a new perspective and experience.

The next key finding discussed was members of the LGBTQ community and their opinions of representation of that community through video game characters. 69% of participants said they would play a game with a main character who was an LGBTQ community member. However, 40% of those participants believed the character's sexual orientation should not be the focus of the game. No participants said they would not play as a LGBTQ character based on their own sexual orientation, but they did not trust developers to create a character from the LGBTQ community that was not reliant on stereotypes. Nontraditional gamers believed the future of LGBTQ characters could be bright if character development was done properly. While the initial usage of these characters would be rocky at first, it would allow more people to experience what being a member of the LGBTQ community is like, and appreciate the way these character identities are socially constructed.

Nontraditional gamers believed male and female character appearance were the most commonly used stereotypes. Female appearance was seen as very sexual. Participants discussed body image and clothing, or lack thereof, as their main issues. Male appearance was seen as physically fit and White, most likely done in an attempt to reach the industry's target audience. At the same time, they noted that male characters come with more variety than female characters. Ironically, players express becoming bored with these characteristics. Due to the way the female body was heavily stereotyped, participants believed this led to the objectification of these characters. A growing concern with nontraditional gamers was the belief of sexualized female characters creating impractical or unhealthy views of females within the real world, especially for the young male gamers the industry sees as their target audience, as well as young females. Participants believed the gamer should be fully aware of their surrounding and understand what appears in game is not an accurate depiction of what occurs within reality. These results will be discussed further in the chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Discussion

  This project's goal was to explore the existence and potential influence of relationships between mainstream video game media's depiction of various identities and its players own feelings about gender representation, stereotype, and identity. This study was selected due to an interest of video game culture and the variety of methods of communication gamers experience during game play. The goals of this study was to discover how participants determined whether they considered themselves gamers and how they came to that conclusion. Other goals included learning about nontraditional gamers' beliefs and feelings toward the game industry and the characters they create. The researcher discovered participants considered gaming to be an identity that was earned through a strong dedication to gaming. This study also discusses beliefs shared by nontraditional gamers about the portrayal of video game characters' genders and the stereotypes that go along with them. The roles these characters play in games and their appearances lead nontraditional gamers to believe the gaming industry believes they are not a huge priority in the gaming world. This research continues the discussion on how women and other individuals outside of the game industry's target audience are seen from the industry's perspective, through their characters and the stereotypes that are portrayed within games. This chapter focuses on creating connections with the larger conversation on gender, identity, and new media. Research question 1 explains how participants decided whether or not they were able to refer to themselves as gamers. Research question 2 discussed participants' beliefs on the future of LGBTQ characters in games, character stereotypes, character bodies and the roles the characters played in games.

Research Question 1

 This study reveals how nontraditional gamers construct their identification with gamer status and their subsequent feelings, beliefs, and attitudes on the gendered and sexual portrayal of video game characters throughout the gaming industry and its surrounding communities. The results of research question 1 found that gamers did not use gender as a way to identify as gamers. They preferred to center their gaming status on their dedication and love of the game.

 The first research question investigated whether or not people who played video games and who did not fit the traditional gamer model identified themselves as "gamers." The data supported a split amongst those who answered the questionnaire. Many of the nontraditional gamers in this study were passionate about video games and considered themselves to be gamers, despite the industry's belief that it is strictly a male oriented pastime ($n = 27$). They are proud to call themselves gamers and, regardless of how often they play or if they are heavily involved in the community, many view gaming as a lifelong hobby. Nontraditional gamers in this study offered two criteria at the center of their gamer identity: 1) *connection to the community* ($n = 7$) and 2) *love for video games* ($n = 20$). Those who did not identify as gamers ($n = 15$) still reported playing games on a semi-regular basis, but for one reason or another do not *feel* as if they were gamers. The reasons these individuals did not identify as gamers did not involve their sex, age, or sexual orientation. Additionally, participant reasoning for identifying or not identifying as a gamer had nothing to do with the sex of the video game characters. Those who would not label themselves as gamers were due to other stigmas associated with being a gamer, such as time spent playing games and the types of games played. The two most common reasons nontraditional gamers did

not identify as gamers were 1) *lack of dedication to gaming* ($n = 10$) or 2) *fitting the gamer mold* ($n = 5$).

During an ethnographic study, Shaw (2011) found that some individuals were not comfortable identifying themselves as gamers because they felt they were outside the confines of what the industry considered "gamers". Similarly to participants in this study, one of the reasons Shaw's (2011) participants did not identify as gamers was that participants did not view gaming as an important aspect of their lives. While a number of participants in the current study did identify as gamers, those who did not expressed that they were not able to identify as gamers because gaming was not a way of life, but a hobby to partake in; gaming was just something fun they did in their free time. Unlike Shaw's (2011) study, the participants in the current study did not display any attitude towards any other social stigmas; such as the idea that only nerds played games. The participants in this current study that did not identify as gamers did not hold any negative connotations or beliefs about those who did, but they did not feel that they were represented by what the industry considered a gamer. A few participants wished they had more time to play games, or reminisced how they missed being a gamer in their past.

Thornham (2008) also focused on the gamer identity and when participants believed it was appropriate to call themselves gamers. Despite the large number of individuals in this study ($n = 45$) exclaiming their love for gaming, very few admitted they were gamers because they felt their approach to gaming was different than established stereotypes and beliefs of what it takes to be a gamer ($n = 15$). Like some of the participants in this study, the individuals in Thornham's study discussed the pressures from the various stereotypes that plague the industry. These stereotypes affect gamers and how the games influence certain aspects of

their life. Thornham found many women were not comfortable referring to themselves as gamers because it was considered a masculine activity, despite participants' high enjoyment of playing games. Those that did identify as gamers did not do so because of a belief that it was masculine, they did so because it was something they truly enjoyed. Female gamers who completed a questionnaire in the current study did not express any issues with being involved in a traditional masculine space, nor did they think they should not be included due to their gender or their sex. Gaming was an activity in which many of the current participants had participated in for decades, and they truly considered it was a part of who they were as a person.

The results in this study were both similar and dissimilar to those of Thornham (2008). For example, the participants in this study believed that gaming was a pleasurable activity for everyone, unlike the participants in Thornham's study. Thornham's female participants did not believe gaming was something you could do alone. Both male and female participants in Thornham's study discussed how normal gamers played for a short amount of time with friends during a party or social event as a way to converse with others, while "geek gamers," or playing for hours on end alone, signaled the player was "socially abnormal" and have "questionable sexuality" (Thornham, 2008, p. 8). In the current study, playing games was seen as something anyone could do, but the time spent gaming was a huge factor in determining ones' status as a gamer. The females in this study were not keen on playing games alone; however, they discussed how they did enjoy playing them with friends. Females in this study also discussed the idea that games were not made with females in mind, and believed males were the target audience for video games.

Results of the current study also indicated those who did not identify as gamers did not believe it was due to their sex or gender ($n = 15$). Participants did; however, identify as non-gamers due to other stereotypes, such as not playing games for enough hours a day or week, not keeping up with the newest games, consoles, and trends, and not actively discussing games at every opportunity. Sixty-seven percent of those participants who did not identify as gamers believed it was due to a lack of dedication to gaming. Even though they played regularly, because their game time averaged less than 20 hours a week, those participants felt unqualified to identify themselves as gamers. The remaining participants did not identify as gamers due to the style of games they played. Participants expressed that due to a preference for playing classic games by themselves rather than newer multiplayer games online, they were not gamers. Once again, this is despite the fact they played games regularly. Many of these individuals spent numerous hours each week playing games they enjoyed, yet if the chosen games were not the current most popular titles, types, or game styles, they did not consider themselves worthy of the title of gamer.

A few participants in this study were quick to apply some kind of label to further contextualize their gaming title ($n = 5$). The labels used most frequently were *hardcor*e gamer or *casual* gamer, and were used as a way that intended to explain how seriously they approached gaming. Beck and Wade (2004) discussed the idea of two similar gamer categories: *frequent gam*er (also known as hardcore gamers) and *moderate gamers* (also known as casual gamers). Hardcore gamers are individuals who not only play games frequently and for long periods of time, they also take immense pride in their skills and accomplishments. Shaw (2011) discussed how many of her participants would admit to playing games, but did not want to call themselves gamers due to the stigmas and stereotypes commonly

associated with video games. They immediately become conflicted with the image of the "dorky" teenager hiding in his room or parent's basement because they are in a relationship, like sports, or have outgoing personalities. Shaw (2011) mentioned how much the industry tends to focus on "girl gamers." While this initial idea was to bring gamers together, it is believed the idea of "girl gamers" will further assist in the thought process of segregation among gamers. Shaw's (2011) participants mentioned how they enjoyed playing titles that had nothing to do with violence or action, such as sports or casual games. Despite sports games taking up over 13% of market sales (ESA, 2015), games without violence and gore are not seen as worthy or authentic because of stigma that influences the belief that true gamers enjoy these qualities.

Results of research question 1 discussed how participants determined whether they were a gamer, or just someone who played games. Twenty participants ($n = 20$) believed gaming was a part of who they were. To them, gaming was something they loved doing more than anything else, and through this, they crafted their identity. Seven participants ($n = 7$) identified as gamers due to the culture and community that surrounded the gaming world. These gamers felt a thrill for competition against other players, and creating friendships through this medium. Through conversations with others in the gaming community, these participants were able to create an activity that helped to shape who they were.

Those who did not identify as gamers believed it was due to not having met some criteria ($n = 15$). Ten participants believed they were not dedicated enough to gaming to be considered a gamer. They were passionate about gaming, but believed the gamer identity required more hours of gameplay than they were willing or able to give. Five participants did not identify themselves as gamers because they did not keep up with the current gaming movement, whether it was

due to refusing to update their game systems or failing to adopt more than one genre of games. For example, Zach considers himself a non-gamer, only playing occasionally and commonly playing only within the genre of sports games. Because he openly enjoys playing video games, one might consider him a gamer, but because his schedule only allows time for limited play and he enjoys only sports-focused gaming, Zach himself does not believe he is worthy of the gamer title.

Research question 1 discussed the understanding of how nontraditional gamers view their gamer identities in relation to the gaming community. Research question 2 reveals how nontraditional gamers view games and characters themselves, specifically through the lens of gender.

Research Question 2

The second research question aimed to discover nontraditional gamer beliefs toward the portrayal of characters within the video game industry. For this study, nontraditional gamers were seen as anyone who does not fit the industry's mold of a gamer: females, members of the LGBTQ community, or anyone over the age of 30. The first theme, *nontraditional character presentation*, reveals how important gender is to the characters in these games. Gender was found to play an influential role in selecting characters, but not for sexualized or discriminatory reasons, but for crafting an experience that is familiar to or easily relatable to the nontraditional gamer. Sixteen participants selected character gender for better identification with the character in question or in order to seek an opportunity to engage in new experiences.

Participants who themselves were feminine were often drawn to more feminine characters, and female participants tended to ($n = 8$) select female

characters due to more immersive gameplay. Female characters within mainstream video games are often feminine, or hyperfeminine, in nature. Thus, feminine participants reported that it was easier to identify with the feminine characters. Males that preferred to play as feminine characters ($n = 6$) reported that they found feminine characters to be a more fulfilling than masculine characters. Characters were vehicles to gain new experiences, because they were playing as someone whose gender identity was not the same as their own. As Toby shared, playing as a female character gives him the opportunity to see things through a more feminine perspective, allowing the player to immerse themselves in the experiences of another. Kelso does the same, and believes it to be a learning experience. This is consistent with Wiseman (2015) who found that female characters were seen as the sex of choice by both female and male participants. Female players found them easily relatable due to being the same sex, while male players found female characters provided a more enriching experience.

The remaining participants ($n = 7$) explained gender was not an issue when selecting characters because they simply wanted to experience the best possible game experience. Sixteen percent of participants ($n = 7$) believed gender did not matter, chose to play with the character they deemed best based on statistics or the game play environment. In fact, the only time gender was ever an issue in character selection with these individuals occurred when one character was extremely disliked due to a harmful stereotype or the hypersexualization of the character. Often, when feminine characters were reduced to overly sexualized appearances and gender stereotypes, participants opted towards the gender that was least upsetting or offensive, which often happened to be more masculine characters. Character selection was based on who the character was and how they were written more than what they looked like.

The second theme, *LGBTQ in the gaming industry*, focused on the LGBTQ community's presence in the gaming industry. Here, the participants speculated how the mindfulness for and inclusion of these identities would evolve in the future. When the discussion of how LGBTQ characters would affect the industry, there was a variety in responses. A majority of participants ($n = 31$) said they would play a game with an LGBTQ character, believing sexual orientation and gender identity should not be a factor in the character's ability to participate in gameplay. As Buffy mentioned, a character can openly identify as LGBTQ, but it should not dramatically alter the gaming experience.

Of those participants who expressed interest in playing as LGBTQ characters, participants were wary of whether the gaming industry could create characters that would be respectful of the community. These individuals express concern that a game featuring an LGBTQ character would reduce the LGBTQ identity to the stereotypes that surround that identity. Jessie was one of three participants who explicitly held little to no interest to play as an LGBTQ character simply because of a lack of faith in the game's developmental team. Mou and Peng (2009) mentioned in their study the effects stereotypes of female game characters can create on gamers. Jessie believes the same could happen with the LGBTQ community, unless a developer was able to create a character in which sexual orientation was not the defining factor of the character. Nobody expressed beliefs that these characters would harm the industry, but there were numerous supporters ($n = 18$) that believe the industry could harm the community if the characters were not done properly. Many role playing games (RPGs), such as *Skyrim* and *Mass Effect*, allow the player the option to enter a relationship with a same sex character if they choose, as well as having the option to have a heterosexual relationship. While participants applauded the fact same sex

relationships are present in a select number of games, these games also give you the option to choose your characters sexual orientation. Participants doubt a LGBTQ character's ability to be popular in the mainstream gaming community in a game where there is no choice.

In this study, much like Wiseman's (2015), participants who expressed a belief that LGBTQ characters were a future possibility believed that this transition would be made easier as acceptance of various gender expressions and sexual orientation becomes more mainstream in Western culture. Participants expressed that growing normalization of LGBTQ identities within society would hopefully influences gamers to understand sexuality differences ($n = 9$). A common reason many were excited to see LGBTQ characters in the future was to introduce the community to individuals who may not have a lot of experience or common misconceptions with sexual orientation. Schleiner (2001) and Kennedy (2002) mentioned that despite her sexualized appearance, *Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft, has done a lot of good when it comes to introducing gamers to the idea of a feminine character. Participants in the current study reported that if a good, well rounded and non-stereotypical LGBTQ character were to exist, the target audience could see that sexual orientation is not as important as many currently believe.

Additionally, Lara Croft has also been credited with bringing many females into the gaming community, showing this is not just a masculine space (Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001). Participants expressed hope that a LGBTQ character created with care could potentially do the same for the community as Lara Croft did; introducing new people to the gaming community who never thought they could be a gamer, due to sexual orientation.

There were a few ($n = 8$), individuals who did not want to see LGBTQ characters because they were afraid of what the gaming industry would do to the

community as a whole. With the consistent and persistent stereotypes and sexualization that is used by the gaming industry for feminine characters, they wondered: what is stopping them from doing something similar with an even more drastically marginalized minority in the gaming community, the LGBTQ community? Shaw (2014) discussed that a reason stereotypes exist in media is due to the writers and creators believing they are true to some extent. In gaming, the same prompts of damsels in distress and sexualized characters continue to be used because they have become the norm. The fear is, because the industry has been catering to their traditional target audience for so long, that any changes to the way they see games will only be met with anger and disappointment toward differing views on sexual orientations and gender identities. The idea of more LGBTQ characters appearing in games was well received in the questionnaire. Agreeing with what Shaw (2014) suggested, participants felt that a well-rounded, non-stereotypical LGBTQ characters would be a welcome asset to the gaming community because the focus would be on the character as a whole, instead of solely their sexuality.

Jansz et al. (2010) found how certain games, such as *The Sims 2,* can attract large audiences of male and female gamers. Participants in this study discussed gameplay being the factor in gaming that requires the most thought, in lieu of other things like sexual orientation representation. Participants in this study believe that if LGBTQ characters are ever going to be regularly seen in games, then the focus needs to be on the game's story and gameplay, instead of the fact they are part of the LGBTQ community. For example, when asked how the gaming industry would be affected by more LGBTQ characters, Barney stated, "on the industry, no negative effects. We might see more story telling of different

perspectives…the industry shouldn't care about what a person is. Game play over the person."

The Sims 2 is a one example of a neutral game not targeted at any particular type of gamer, gender, or person. Developers of The Sims 2 do not attempt to cater to a specific audience, such as the traditional gamer. Jansz et al. (2010) discussed as more developers attempt to make niche games for a particular kind of person, such as a specific gender or sexual orientation, the more reluctant those outside of those identities are to play. Jackie believes gamers should "only care about the quality of the game itself," rather than worry about a game's intended audience.

The third theme, *stereotypes of videogame characters*, characterizes how participants believed gender stereotypes frequently used in video games portrayed both males and females in a negative light. While this study showed only some participants believed themselves to be affected by stereotyped nontraditional characters, all participants reportedly understood how other gamers could be affected. Much like Behm-Morawitz and Mastro's (2009) study, many participants in the current study ($n = 10$) brought up the character's appearance as the biggest issue with gender stereotypes. Hypersexuality is found to often attract male gamers to video games in the first place since they tend to be the target audience (Mou & Peng, 2009; Soukup, 2007). Behm-Morawitz and Mastro's participants indicated to feel lowered self-worth if they were not able to meet the same standards and requirements of the female characters they played as. Similarly, many of the participants in this study did not consider themselves as attractive as the characters in games and did not believe they could realistically achieve characters' level of beauty. Male appearance was discussed as well, with male and female participants in the current study ($n = 13$) described them the same way: strong and heroic, with a bad-boy attitude.

Another stereotype mentioned by participants was character gender roles. Women traditionally hold supporting roles to the conquering masculine hero ($n =$ 11). Rosalind described two forms a female character can take with the game world, with very little examples of characters in between: damsel in distress or sexual object to be consumed. The feminine character is there to be rescued, completely helpless, often with unrealistic body proportions and little clothing. Participants in this study discussed the idea that female characters could never be a hero. Female participants argued that without some sort of superpower or supernatural advantage, a female hero would be seen as unachievable because it is a role typically associated with victory and competition, which are viewed as masculine gender traits ($n = 5$). Male characters appear to be created to be able to withstand everything given their overly muscular body type, or are easily given the equipment needed for them to survive (Gray, 2014).

The final theme, *stereotype consumption and gamers*, emerged from what participants thought about the way stereotypes are presented for both male and female characters and how they might affect the gamers that play these games. One pattern discovered in the data was a concern over how hypersexualized female characters might affect male gamers. Overwhelmingly, nontraditional gamers agreed there is good reason to worry about how scantily clad female video game characters may alter male gamers' perceptions of females in the outside world ($n = 25$). The reoccurring theme of females dressing in revealing clothing and acting submissive to male characters has the potential to be something traditional gamers grow to expect in their everyday lives. Participants argued that mainstream portrayals of female characters reinforced harmful stereotypes and that may impact male gamers' views of women in general. Miller and Summers (2007) discussed the idea that the video game industry is a business, and like any

other business, you need to know your target audience. In this study, the idea of female characters not being created with female gamers in mind was mentioned numerous times, which echoed Soukup's (2007) discussion of the target audience for video game companies' idea of a gamer being young heterosexual males. The ability to create the idea of a perfect woman cannot only harm young males, but young females as well (Kennedy, 2002).

The potential effects of video game character stereotypes on players is a common theme in the research. Multiple participants in this study expressed concern for younger children of any gender. Because adolescents are often still forming their gender identity, Mou and Peng (2009) found that younger gamers were more likely to be affected by stereotypes. Participants in this study feared that young girls would grow up unsatisfied with their bodies and boys grow up with unrealistic body expectations for females. Much of the participant concern with male gamers was the growing popularity of video games with sexualized female characters. Because of this, many individuals believe this will continue the threat of misogyny in society (Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001). A study from Martins et al. (2009) found the way female bodies were portrayed in video games could play a role in projecting how individuals looked at female bodies in reality. Like participants in this study, there was a growing concern that people, especially children would be the ones who would be most at risk for developing a belief that women should look or dress a certain way based on their appearances in media. For example, Melina shares her belief that frequent exposure to stereotyped characters could create gendered expectations:

I'm not too fond of the idea to sexualize female characters because it could really damage the self-esteem of women who are playing or watching the

games. They think these characters are "perfect" and a lot of girls will do whatever it takes to look like them…

Because of the way bodies are represented in video games, many fear the potential of video games may influence specific gender identities. Gender identity is created through communication and interaction with the world around us; the imagery and representations of gender that we receive through media hold the persuasive potential to influence gender identity, norms and roles. As individuals see particular representations of gender, such as how certain bodies are depicted in video games, it can influence how we believe that body should look and act. Research question 2 found that character portrayal in video games might in fact play a role in gender identity. The first theme addressed whether or not sex was an important aspect of character selection when it came to character selection. Thirty-six percent of participants preferred playing as female characters over males. The female players with this preference enjoyed using female characters because they enjoy using characters that looked like them. Male players enjoyed using female characters because it provided more unique experiences and was a fun way to get a new perspective.

The second theme observed how LGBTQ characters are seen from within the gaming industry. Thirty-one participants would play as an LGBTQ character in a video game, but 17 participants expressed concern for that the industry wouldn't create a character that is respectful of the LGBTQ community due to the lacking LGBTQ presence in the video game industry. This led 18 participants to believe the industry would heavily rely on stereotypes, which would lead to the perpetuation of these stereotypes upon other gamers. While some participants believed that, in time, LGBTQ characters could have a growing presence in video

games, eight thought this change could potentially harm the community by portraying LGBTQ characters in a way that might hurt the community.

The third theme focused on how participants observed stereotypes regarding characters. Females were seen as hypersexualized and were dressed provocatively. Male characters were seen as hypermasculine and always in control of the situations. Participants believed male and female characters were created in a way to appease the target audience. Participants also found female characters to be objectified due to the way these characters dressed and behaved during gameplay.

The fourth theme observed the roles male and female characters play in video games. Participants believed the roles for male players were a lot more varied and numerous compared to the limited number of roles that were available for female characters. Female characters on occasion were given roles of power over men, but were highly sexualized in their demeanor or clothing. While male characters were seen to have numerous options when it came to roles they could play, participants were tired of constantly seeing them in varied positions of power.

The final theme discussed how participants believed consistent stereotypes could potentially affect male and female gamers. When it came to the target audience, participants were concerned the sexualization of female characters could cause a lot of issues, especially for younger gamers. Participants feared nontraditional gamers would be just as affected by stereotypes as traditional gamers, if not more. Younger female players could see the sexualized characters and believe that overt displays of female sexuality are something that is obligated. Participants do not believe these stereotyped characters are good role models for young girls, and are also concerned with what might occur in their interactions

with other gamers. Gamers frequently use in-game communication in order to talk during gameplay. Other players cannot see faces, just hear voices. Twelve participants shared a belief that other male players may give female players a difficult time through harassment, both verbal and sexual, through in-game communication.

As previously mentioned, ontology is the process of being (Miller, 2005). Thus, the social constructionist ontology, found within the interpretive paradigm, states that realities of being are constantly built, reaffirmed, changed and evolved by the communication of the participants within that reality. Gamers within the community are constantly creating and changing the reality of what it means to be a gamer through their communication within the community. Social constructivism has three implications. The first of the implications discusses the idea of multiple realities, which can exist simultaneously, with each created reality being seen as no more true or false than any other. Interpretive studies, such as this one, allow for the creation and validation of multiple individual realities. This allows each gamer's lived experience to issue a unique and true reality that allows us to understand what is important to the gamer when considering the potential gamer identity. Second, the processes that allow the realities to come to life are used by those within the community. The processes that allow the realities of the gamers in this study is the communication within the community, including, but not limited to: multiplayer gamers, online forums, conventions, etc. Communication within the gaming community helps to build and reaffirm what a gamer is within the community. These various social realities are created through and by the communication that is enacted by the gamers within their own community. These participants simultaneously deconstructed the industry's ideals for gamer identity while they created new realities of what the gamer title means

to the gaming community at large. Finally, a reality cannot be understood unless an individual understands where the reality comes from. In order for an individual to gain an understanding of another reality, there needs to be an element of common ground in order to create an interpretation of that reality. Only those within the gaming community can most fully interpret and understand those realities within the community. This could be a reason behind why the idea of a target audience is still an issue today. By choosing to take a focus on the benefits of the game industry versus the benefits of the gamer, the industry fails to notice the various realities created by the gamers.

This study finds that the idea of the traditional gamer the video game industry projects into the world is not the socially constructed idea of a gamer. According to the results of the present study, being a gamer is about passion, dedication, and participation within the gaming community. There were two potential identities discussed in this study: gamer and non-gamer. Those who claimed to be a gamer did not do so because they fit the socially constructed idea of a gamer according to the gaming industry, they did so because it was something they created through hours of playing and community interaction. These participants are changing what it means to be a gamer. They are showing the industry, through the community, that gaming is not a male thing, it is a human thing.

<div align="center">Limitations</div>

A limitation for this study was the choice of a one-step open-ended questionnaire anonymously completed online through Qualtrics with no contact information collected. This was a limitation because follow-up questions of the participants were not asked; clarification or elaboration was not available. While

the coding process revealed great data, there were some answers that were very broad or confusing and the researcher could not ask for clarification. There were numerous participant responses that submitted full answers, but would have benefitted from additional probing questions or comments. For example, when Tina was asked if she identified as a gamer, her response was "No. I occasionally play with family and friends, but not on a regular basis to earn the title 'gamer.'" A follow-up question that would have provided more usable data could have been to clarify what a "regular basis" is, and how often one would need to play to reach that plateau. Follow-up questions would allow participants to expand on their responses, which could lead to more usable data.

Another major limitation and influence on the study is the lack of overall societal knowledge about gender and identity. It is no stretch to argue that society still very much defaults to a binary view of gender, only masculine and feminine, and the false equivalence of biological sex and the social construction of gender identity. Wood (2014) stated that it has only been within the last 40 years that scholarship began to focus on sex and gender as fundamentally different in nature. Due to a lack of information about how sex and gender are defined as different, some participants continued to mix the two terms up. In this way, some conflation between sex and gender were reflected in participant answers and the researcher could not clarify or confirm as to when the participants were conflating sex and gender. This, when coupled with the inability to ask follow-up questions, led to some answers being unsuitable for the current study.

<div align="center">Future Research</div>

Future research on this subject should probe how much of an effect these video game characters have on a person's daily life. A different kind of qualitative

study on gender identity could really aid in understanding individuals who are subjected to not only stereotyped characters, but video games in general. An example of a study would be to ask participants to keep a journal or diary on the games they play and what occurs during this game. Participants could keep track of stereotypical behavior, note their thoughts and feelings about the behavior as well as the frequency of the behaviors and what is being portrayed. These entries could also note any personal implications to their own gender identity playing these characters has on them; if they are aware of these effects. Second, a quantitative survey using Likert scale measurements of participant gender identity characteristics before and after playing particular games could be conducted as a separate study or along with one using diaries.

Another idea for future video game research would be to more thoroughly examine the gaming industry and the people that work within it. Weststar and Legault (2015) surveyed 3000 industry employees all over the world. Their findings showed an increase of females and LGBTQ employees over the past few years. While this survey accurately displayed what kinds of people worked within the gaming industry, it failed to account for experiences and feelings toward these changes. An ethnography of a video game developer could more deeply examine how these individuals are seen within the industry. It would move the study of the gaming industry forward by seeing if these individuals are now seen as equals to their male counter parts.

Finally, another future study could focus on race, in addition to gender identity. Intersectionality is the place where an individual's identity intersects and blends together. The multiplicity of human identity is inescapable. All people exist within their own personal intersections of privilege and power such as race, sexual orientation, or gender identity (Crenshaw, 1991). Video game characters of other

races are also shown in a variety of ways that differ from White characters, while these manners of difference are still influenced by gender. For example, in *Grand Theft Auto 5* players can solicit services from in-game sex workers. The White female sex workers are found in upper or middle-class neighborhoods and appear to be well dressed and better looking, while Black female sex workers are portrayed as dirty and potentially abused. The purpose of this study would be to observe how stereotypical portrayal of a character's race and gender effect how gamers determine their own racial and gender identities.

Conclusion

This study aimed to discover if and how nontraditional gamers identify themselves as having earned the title of gamer and how gender identity plays a role in this identification as well as what do nontraditional gamers believe about how video game characters are portrayed within the video game industry and how does gender identity play a role in these beliefs.

The participants in this study did not believe being a gamer had anything to do with gender, but it had everything to do with how an individual approached gaming. Individuals believed that in order to be considered a gamer, there had to be a passion for it. Participants felt that gaming was not just a hobby, but a way of life. Taking time out of their lives to play these games and become a part of the gaming community as a whole were also considered things a gamer must do. Those who did not identify as gamers felt this way as well. They loved playing video games, but due to not fitting the gamer mold or a lack of resources available to dedicate to gaming, they would not consider themselves gamers.

In their discussion of how video game characters are portrayed, participants believed sex and stereotypical portrayals of characters could affect both gamers

and nontraditional gamers alike. Both male and female characters are stereotyped by their appearance and roles. Females would constantly be portrayed as sexualized while being a damsel in distress while male characters were shown as very strong, aggression and confrontational; traditionally masculine characteristics. These male characters were seen as the heroes. The frequent portrayal of female sexuality and helplessness led participants to believe this would lead to objectification of female characters, which could lead to objectification of females in the real world.

Participants expressed interest in playing as LGBTQ characters, but argued that the industry may not do a great job of creating a character properly and respectfully. An example of what is considered proper is portraying sexual orientation as a part of the character's existence, instead of their whole reason for existence. There is hope that one day, LGBTQ characters will be a regular feature in games, but there is also concern that the rest of the gaming community might take time to adjust to the idea of LGBTQ characters fulfilling a main character role.

This study has extended knowledge of where nontraditional gamers see themselves fitting within the gaming community. A reoccurring theme discussed among the participants was the idea that the video game industry does not understand how to create characters that would attract members outside of the target audience of young, heterosexual males. This information helps us understand what nontraditional gamers hope to see within the future of gaming, in hopes the industry will start creating games with everyone in mind, rather than a specific group of people. Because there does not seem to be any rush to make gaming an all-inclusive activity by the gaming industry, nontraditional gamers must instead make themselves a presence within the gaming industry. GaymerX is

a gaming convention that focuses on the inclusion of all gamers, especially those within the LGBTQ Community (Orland, 2012; Pescovitz, 2012). This convention was started in August of 2013 by Matt Conn, and has continued to increase in popularity since the initial event (Nicholson, 2015).

Nontraditional gamers are also attempting to get themselves noticed by the creation of gaming YouTube channels. These gamers play games and record the footage, often providing commentary of the game, narration of what is happening on screen, or discussions with their viewers. For example, one nontraditional gamer in this study who has become very successful with her gaming channel is Shirley Curry who loves gaming at 81 years old. Despite being outside of what the industry considers a gamer, she does not hesitate to call herself one (S. Curry, personal communication, October 29 2015). When asked in an interview why she felt comfortable enough to consider herself a gamer, Curry replied:

> Because I have played for so many years and been so addicted to it and like so many genres of games and because once I got up my nerve to record because it looked like so much fun for everyone else, I have gotten such a tremendous response and love my comments so much that yes! They have given me so much encouragement and accepted me as a gamer, that now, yes, I feel like a gamer.

Like Curry, many of the participants in this study did not hesitate to refer to themselves as gamers, despite their gender, sexual orientation and age not meeting what the industry considers traditional gamers (Soukup, 2007). Those who did not identify themselves as gamers still loved playing games, but did not consider themselves to be gamers due to time restraints or lack of interest in new games. From data gathered in the study, it appears the only people who consider the idea of a traditional gamer is the industry themselves. Video game designer Brenda

Laurel discusses in an article for *Polygon* the reaction she received when discussing the idea that that females could be considered a potential audience:

> Generally speaking, it did not occur to any of the companies I worked for that they should be looking at female audience for games, it was always 'Oh of course girls don't play games.' I got that so many times. 'Of course girls don't play games- so why are we going to waste money on this audience that doesn't exist.' (Lein, 2013)

Instead of building a wall between themselves and gamers of every gender, age, sexual orientation, race, etc., they should embrace the fact anyone and everyone has the potential to be a gamer. During the interview, Shirley expressed how she strongly believes the reason many people have a negative feeling toward games is because the industry never shows nontraditional people in advertisements or playing games:
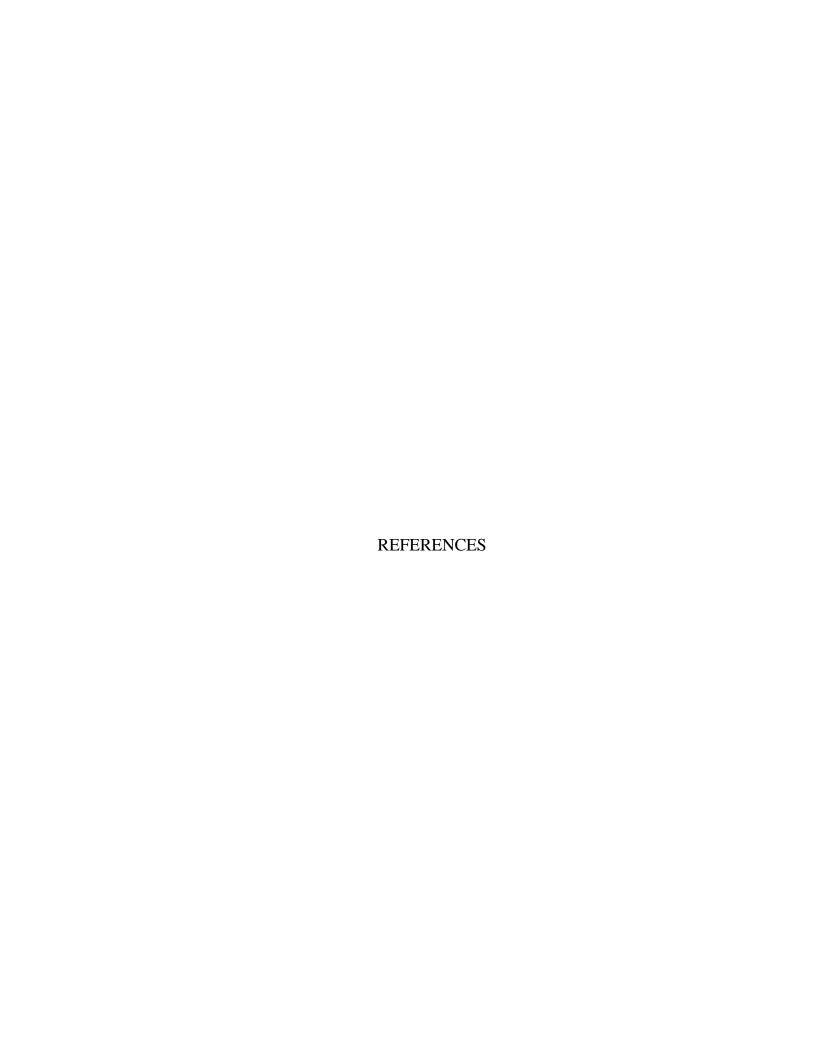
> The gaming industry puts out the games for us to play, it's just that in their advertising instead of showing young people playing and stuff like that, they could show some older people, they could show pictures of a young person and an older person interacting together, it might encourage them to do so. A lot of the young people want to, they are just discouraged by the older person saying 'No, I'm too old to play'. Well, they've been made to feel that way probably because nothing ever directs any advertising to them playing (S. Curry, personal communication, October 29, 2015).

Shirley repeatedly mentioned during the interview there were older gamers who were in hiding because of their age, considering themselves too old for the gaming community to accept them as one of their own.

Shirley has become a YouTuber and represents the fact you are never too old to play games, and quite a few younger gamers have welcomed her into the

community with open arms. Wiseman (2015) found teens in junior high were more open about the possibility of different kinds of people being represented in gaming, despite being the prime target audience for video game developers. If the gaming community can accept Shirley, a nontraditional gamer into their hearts and game lobbies, what is stopping them from accepting other females and members of the LGBTQ community individuals as well?

The overall takeaway of this study is that nontraditional gamers may have issues with the video game industry, but they will still play games regardless. They understand the industry's reasons for catering to certain groups due to the amount of money these players spend on their items. These nontraditional gamers understand that until they monetarily prove to the industry they are worth supporting, they will continue to be under the radar. Even if the time comes when nontraditional gamers are seen by the industry as a viable group to market towards, there are worries the characters will reflect inaccurate values and stereotypes, which leads to many nontraditional gamers to become complacent with this issue. In their minds, no representation is better than offensive or inaccurate representation.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INFORMED GAMER QUESTIONNAIRE
CONSENT FORM

Choose Your Identity: Gender Identity Formation through Video Game Characters: Informed Consent Form

Please read the following explanation of this study. Signing this form will indicate you have been informed about the study and that you consent to participate. I want to ensure you understand what you are being asked to do and what risks and benefits-if any-are associated with the study. This should help you decide whether you want to participate.

You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Daniel Cavallero, BA, a master's student under the direction of Falon Kartch, Ph.D- both at the Communication Department, California State University, Fresno, 5241 N. Maple Ave. Fresno,CA 93740.

Project description This study is about how nontraditional gamers construct and maintain identities through video game characters that are created for traditional gamers. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate at any time.

Procedures If you agree to take part in this study, I will ask you about your experiences with gender stereotyped characters and your feelings about being a nontraditional gamer. Furthermore, here are examples of questions I may ask you during the online questionnaire:

· Would you identify yourself as a gamer?
· Have video games influenced how you think about gender stereotypes?
· What are some things good female character should have? Male character?

Approximately 20 nontraditional gamers will be invited to participate in this study. The questionnaires will occur online at a time that is most convenient for you, and last roughly 15-20 minutes.

Risks and discomforts Risks for participating in this study are minimal. You will be participating in a questionnaire that may elicit emotions about your gaming experiences. The only risk of the study is the possibility of experiencing some stress from discussing aspects of gaming. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you may choose to skip questions, or you may ask to be withdrawn.

Benefits There are no direct benefits for participating in this study other than an understanding of how you might identify games and characters that focus on gender stereotypes and those that do not.

Study withdrawl You have the right to withdraw your consent or stop participating at any time, for any reason. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions.

Confidentiality Every effort will be made to maintain the privacy of your data. To protect confidentiality, no personal identifying information will be used. The results may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your name will not be used.

To reduce concerns about confidentiality, you will be assigned a pseudonym by the researcher, and none of your information will be will be kept under your real name. All electronic files of interview transcripts and audio files will be kept in physically secured locations by using password-protected files and locked drawers.

Invitation for questions If you have questions about this study, you should ask a researcher before you sign this consent form. If you have any questions following this study, please feel free to contact Daniel Cavallero at dacavallero@csufresno.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project, or any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study, you may report them-confidentially, if you wish-to the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 559.278.4468.

Authorization I have read this informed consent form about the study, or it was read to me. I know the possible risks and benefits. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study. I know that I can withdraw at any time. I have received, on the date of the signature, a copy of this document.

Clicking to the next page means you consent to participate in this study

APPENDIX B: NONTRADITIONAL GAMER QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your age?

2. I identify my gender as…

3. I identify my sexual orientation as…

4. What is your racial/ethnic background?

5. Do you have a favorite video game character? Who is it and why?

6. What platform(s) do you play video games? (for example: Xbox, PlayStation, PC, Mobile, etc.)

7. How long have you been playing video games?

8. Would you identify yourself as a gamer? Why or why not?

9. On average, how often do you play video games over the course of a week?

10. Do you prefer playing as male or female characters? Why?

11. Please answer the following questions:

    a. How would you describe a typical male game character? Why?

    b. How do these characteristics of male characters make you feel?

    c. Can you name any male video game characters that heavily display gender stereotyping?

12. Please answer the following questions:

    a. How would you describe a typical female video game character? Why?

    b. How do these characteristics of female characters make you feel?

    c. Can you name any female video game characters that heavily display gender stereotyping?

13. Have video games influenced how you think about gender stereotypes? If so, how? It not, why not?

14. In your opinion, what kind of impact, if any, would the inclusion of LGBTQ+ video game characters have on the video game industry? On gamers as a whole? Please explain your answer.

15. Would you play a game with a gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered character? Please explain your answer.

16. Do you think female video game characters have an impact on female gamers? If so, why? If not, why not?

17. Do you think unrealistic female characters influence male gamers? If so, why? If not, why not?