

Gender Identity Construction through Talk about Video Games

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Recommended Citation

Cole, Sara M. "Gender Identity Construction through Talk about Video Games." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16.5 (2014): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2487>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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Volume 16 Issue 5 (December 2014) Article 9

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/9>>

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 16.5 (2015)***

Special Issue ***New Work on Electronic Literature and Cyberculture***

Ed. Maya Zalbidea, Mark C. Marino and Asunción López-Varela

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/>>

Abstract: In her article "Gender Identity Construction through Talk about Video Games" Sara M. Cole discusses the construction of gender identity in terms of experiences of digital media and interactive play. Digital literacy expresses, shares, and reaffirms gendered self-identification through experiences of video game play with narratives that either confirm or deny stereotypical biases. In-depth interviews were used to explore the effects of play practices on conceptions of masculinity and personal identity in males who grew up in the 1980s by focusing on a linguistic analysis of the pragmatics of their shared thoughts on play, fantasy, use of digital media, and violence. This investigation provides insight into the influences of fantasy and play on future perceptions of reality as well as cultural identification and in/out group formation. The study gives voice to these participants through a pragmatics of verbal discourse regarding gender identity construction as influenced by both childhood and adult experiences of interactive digital entertainment media.

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Gender Identity Construction through Talk about Video Games

This case study provides a pragmatic linguistic analysis of participants' shared thoughts on digital interactive video game play. The interview data provides insight into the participants' personal understandings and representations of masculine identity and gendered self-expression. For the study, male participants of similar ages and professional backgrounds completed in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting between one and two hours. I analyze the results of the study through critical discourse analysis, which provides a framework for looking at the ways language expresses conceptions of identity and participants' understandings of the cultural influences that might affect one's lifestyle, self-identification, and discourse. I also explore the ways in which childhood play activities with violent, traditionally masculine themes influence adult interpretations of tolerance to real violence in association with expressions of Western masculine identity. My analysis is intended to inform masculinity studies through a small sample that provides an additional lens of insight into male talk about video games, specifically supporting academic disciplines focusing on linguistic analysis of gender self-identification and identity creation. The linguistic data collected through this set of interviews also provides insight into the video game play activities of boys in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the connections that this form of interactive digital play has to adult play activities and gendered self-identification later in life. I build on analyses of expressions of masculine identity and video game play experiences in order to address the developmental aspects of cultural understanding, identity formation, and meaning-making in such activities. Analysis of masculine discourse provides insight into the influences of fantasy in digital play on perceptions of the self in reality in terms of gender as well as other identity markers (for further reading on mental, emotional, and cultural development through play, see, e.g., Bateson; Furth; Piaget; Sutton-Smith, Wertsch).

Participants in this study discussed their experiences growing up playing traditionally male-oriented games. For instance, one participant explained that as a child, he did not feel his play habits were gender specific. However, he went on to state that "when you look at it now and you give it a label ... there were lots of things that were more male-oriented as opposed to 'gee, did you have tea parties,' 'did you play Barbie, Chutes and Ladders,' you know, whatever! My Little Pony. None of that stuff." He continued this explanation, stating that "it was mostly ... guy play. Even when I was playing with my sister it was mostly guy play because it was Star Wars and G. I. Joe." This interview participant, George, describes his play activities as "guy play," as opposed to play that might be either gender-neutral or feminized, based on its thematic content. Star Wars and G.I. Joe, for instance, are entertainment franchises that are most often marketed specifically to a young male audience, star male protagonists, and follow narratives in keeping with structures of Western male hegemonic stereotypes of the hero. In another example, a participant was asked about male-centered play in his youth. He responded that he felt "like it was more about socialization. I was just around more of my male friends." Gender-specific playgroups were understood by this participant as a product of chance or circumstance rather than as associated with game content or social norms. Analysis of such discourse from this study's participants thus illuminates hegemonic expectations and assumptions while repeatedly making evident that the participants were aware of gendered stereotypes. Their language implies a sense of introspection and an acknowledgement—perhaps triggered because they were speaking to a female researcher—masculinity has negative connotations and at the very least requires discussion of its nuanced and complex iterations with regards to personal gender identity.

In order to understand how participants' self-reported identity markers fit into a larger cultural context, it is necessary to establish the foundational trends in general concepts of Western masculinity in the United States. As described by Debby A. Phillips, cultural representations of masculinity historically "revolve around appearance (looks, clothes, strength), having male friends, heterosexuality (having a girlfriend, rejecting homosexuality), and getting respect primarily through economic status, athletics, toughness, and violence" (224). Traditional masculine behavior, according to Chris Walton, Adrienne Coyle, and Evanthia Lyons "is said to involve the concealment of emotions that might imply vulnerability or dependency although it permits the expression of emotions such as anger" (403). The-

se expectations become internalized by both male and female members of society and thus require dissection through cultural and media theory (in this case a close discourse analysis). Examining linguistic data helps provide a clearer idea of how play influences real perceptions and how adult men choose to discuss their personal understandings of these cultural influences.

Participants in this study expressed awareness of gendered discourses and stereotypes that exist in their society. Despite their acknowledgement of the impact of culture on individuals, the specific language participants used may implicitly reaffirm certain biased stereotypical discourses inadvertently through the details of their speech patterns. For instance, the connection between violence and masculinity was both stated and implied by the participants. Helen Hatchell explains that "'naturalistic' gender discourses are reflected in discourses of war and violence and intimately link violence and hegemonic masculinity ... [and] support the traditional dichotomy of gender roles" (383). This naturalization of discourses of violence, both in terms of fantasy/play and real-life experiences of violence, secures gendered divisions of expressions of and reactions to violence and also supports traditional assumptions about male identity. Therefore, the relationship between violence and masculinity often goes unstated in casual conversation due to this inherent naturalization, and male speakers often have difficulty expressing opinions or interests that are in conflict with the social expectations related to their comfort with and preference toward violent themes, especially in entertainment media.

The relationship between learning and play, especially interactive digital play, has been explored primarily in relation to the physiological and psychological impacts of desensitization to the violence that is so often an integral theme of entertainment such as video games and film. This topic has also been previously addressed in terms of play practices in association with professional career choice, particularly in my 2012 study "Play and Profession." In addition to career choice, in my previous work I also explore language used to express this disconnect between entertainment or fiction and reality. However, it is also essential to address the views of players or audience members themselves to gain a more complete understanding of the effects of such media; thus, the emphasis in this study on the personal voice of the participants in play. The ways in which players self-report their experiences are influenced by both their childhood and adult forms of play. The interview data supports the presence of gendered perceptions and discourses of subjects that are masculinized, such as their experiences of violent play. The male participants in this study grew up in the United States in the 1980s playing games and engaging in interactive media with violent themes, but do not connect these experiences directly to their tolerance for violence in reality as adults.

Despite assertions that there is no link between one's comfort level with or enjoyment of violent play and one's tolerance for violence in reality, there are some linguistic devices evident in the results of this study that imply an either unrecognized or un-admitted connection between the two concepts. Participants were reluctant to admit that traditional masculine themes in games appealed to them when the subject matter—for example, extremely violent action—was potentially stigmatizing or offensive. Additionally, it was uncomfortable for participants to express stereotypically masculine or overtly aggressive characteristics during the interview process. In the present study I also explore these complexities in order to build on play theory and also provides a linguistic analysis of gender self-identification, identity creation, and the connections that video game play has to the developmental aspects of cultural understanding, identity formation, and meaning making in digital interactive play activity.

Several longform, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis with a select sample of research participants, either in person or via Skype online video conferencing (at the time of this writing seven interviews were complete, each lasting approximately two hours). These data provide insights into the effects of play activity on future masculine identity, specifically in terms of tolerance to violence, in a meaningful way through the participant's explanations of the types of games they played as children and continue to play as adults. The structure of the interviews was intended to allow for a freely communicative environment in which participants ideally felt comfortable sharing the details of their experiences, feelings, and ways of understanding. All names included in this report are pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves. The anonymity of the interviewees helps to support an interview process in which research participants are free to share details of their personal lives that sometimes support and are sometimes at odds with traditional values of masculini-

ty in United States culture, a disconnect that is potentially emotionally or otherwise problematic for participants if their names are revealed publicly.

The research participants were chosen with the assumption that they had all had similar cultural experiences growing up in the 1980s and early 1990s on the east coast of the United States. All participants at the time of the interviews were between the ages of 25 and 35 years. This excluded any participants that grew up playing later generations of games (a topic for future research). Participants were also selected based on their active or recent engagement in a career in law enforcement, the military, or a related field in which a certain level of exposure to violence of different kinds is expected. This purposive (non-random) sample was chosen to exemplify men with daily experiences in reality that could potentially mirror those found in violent video game play. Participants contributed their own thoughts and additional information when appropriate to questions asked by the interviewer, at times prompting a tangential exploration of experiences not outlined in the original interview. This freedom of expression is ideal for a linguistic analysis of masculine discourse because it allows participants to speak more naturally than they might within the confines of a more rigid interview. Skype interviews were used for participants who were unavailable for in-person interaction. Video conferencing technology is limiting in the sense that online video-call quality cannot be standardized, and there is risk for possible misunderstandings or a loss of clarity in the linguistic data that is not ideal. However, there were very few difficulties during most interview sessions and any interviewers were asked to repeat themselves if audio quality was questionable at any point. Time differences between locations required that these interviews take place in varied conditions and at different times of the day. However, these inconsistencies are considered only marginally influential on the data collected as personal opinions shared in these interviews did not seem to differ drastically based on the timing of the interviews. Participants directly quoted in this document were chosen because they provided discourse that was often representative of the group as a whole, or their words provided the clearest example of the trends present in the interview responses overall.

Linguistic data from these interviews has been analyzed through pragmatics and critical discourse analysis. These analytical methods involve looking at language in detail while keeping in mind complex contextual influences (see Cameron, *Working With Spoken Discourse*; Cutting *Pragmatics and Discourse*). This requires interview transcripts be broken down in terms of word choice and sentence structure. Any pauses or laughter, deep breaths, code switching, or other linguistic devices exhibited in the interview data were considered in terms of probable meaning and potential relation to individual identity and ideological discourse attributes of the participant. Ideology as constructed and reinforced through discourse practices is explored by, for example, Jann Scheuer and Teun Van Dijk. Expressions of ideology may take the form of in-/out-group identification, such as referring to "us" versus "them" in order to self-identity as a member of a group (see Van Dijk). The talk provided by research participants in this study implied detailed knowledge of ideologies and discourses that are most socially acceptable and appropriate for conversation of this type, a consideration that tints their responses and may have resulted in the de-emphasizing of overt ideological assertions. Therefore, the nuances and details of language use are all the more integral to a deep reading of this interview data.

Each interview was recorded digitally (audio only), transcribed manually, and then coded first for thematic content and then more explicitly for pragmatic analysis. In the excerpts from transcription provided in this document, the following visual indicators are used: 1) The letter I references the Interviewer; 2) (#) during discourse indicates the seconds of pause between speech acts; 3) 1. 2. 3. on the left hand side of the page labels the line of discourse for analytical reference; 4) // indicates any overlap or interruption; 5) underlined text indicates emphasis on certain syllables or words; 6) ?'s indicate uptake; 7) :: indicates drawn out speech; and 8) (.) indicates a clear pause.

These pragmatic coding devices help dissect the details of talk for closer analysis of topic, specific intentions, and overall meaning. The participants' discourses regarding childhood play activities, specifically in terms of video game play, were analyzed in terms of their influence on the construction of masculine identity overall. Participants referenced similar childhood play activities, most likely due to their closeness in age. The participants' similarity in age, sex, location, socio-economic status, hobbies, and career choice reflect shared exposure to similar popular cultural influences. The ways in which participants expressed their interest or disinterest in certain ideas, actions, or identities provides insight into the ways people create their identities, the factors that influence that construction, and

the ways in which they choose to present themselves to others especially according to gender norms. Interview responses expressed varied forms of masculinity, but all participants shared a similar foundational knowledge of U.S. masculine gender roles, implying a shared cultural knowledge. The influence of popular culture and entertainment media (video games and otherwise) on this traditional cultural understanding of masculinity is addressed in the works of Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins and Michael S. Kimmel. What it means to be a man is very specific and is often defined in negative terms (for example, as feminine, compassionate, complex, accepting of difference). This influences not only the way men report their own roles in play and in society, but also their experiences of others. Many of the participants recalled playing in mixed-gendered groups, yet most of their preferred play activities centered on characters and themes that were culturally marketed to young male audiences, such as G.I. Joe, Star Wars, and MegaMan. This tendency was cited during interviews as the causal factor in participants having more male friends than female, especially before high school. Female friends would be supposedly welcome to play but the themes and content of the games were still traditionally male-centric, therefore making it difficult for female players to remain interested.

In keeping with hegemonic structures, analyses of military male discourse, such as that of Ramon Hinojosa, support a construction of masculinity "that is symbolically dominant over others" in which "men position themselves as more morally oriented, self-disciplined, physically capable, emotionally controlled, martially skilled, or intelligent" (179). Participants tended to distance themselves from overt statements that supported the superiority of males, perhaps due to cultural sensitivity or because they were being interviewed by a female researcher. For example, Leon (L), a research participant who served in the U.S. Army, remarked: 1. L: I had specific levels that I enjoyed?; 2. L: more than others (.) and would specifically play for those; and 3. L: and I wouldn't care about progressing the story. This discourse asserts that the social or narrative-driven incentives of game play were inconsequential. Leon asserts that competitive and rule-based elements of play were more enjoyable, stressing the words "levels" (line 1) and "story" (line 3) in order to clarify the distinction between these two play elements for Leon. Levels of most video games contain active short-term goals without necessarily being narrative driven. Within the confines of a single level or segmented play scenario, a player can (as one participant put it) "just destroy everything," whereas playing an entire game that ties into a story implies narrative (a commonly feminized topic) and perhaps requires a deeper level of interest or meaning. This increased level of investment, or care, seemed to be outside the realm of traditional masculine acceptability. This is reminiscent of common male speech acts that position men, especially as boys, as interested only in conflict and physicality, rather than more feminized concepts like stories that might imply concerns for characters' wellbeing, becoming emotionally involved, etcetera. Stereotypically masculine discourses of domination and destruction are evident in this brief statement, as well. Leon began his remarks with the phrase "well, I just..." implying a sense that the discourse is simple or obvious, justified, and logical. His speech in the excerpt above is direct, with few hesitations or fillers other than the brief pause (line 2). This implies clarity of thought and expression, and a confidence in his beliefs and the ways in which such statements will be interpreted by the listener.

Similarly, when asked whether his enjoyment of violent themes in games related in any way to his self-identification as an Army soldier, he again answered directly but chose to re-frame the idea of violence, making the connection between his play habits and military identity less concrete: 1. L: Well, there's definitely a correlation (2); 2. L: I don't know about violence, but (1); 3. L: more action.; 4. L: But violent action. (2); 5. L: Violence is (.) yeah (.) I would say. Although not muddled or confusing, this discourse is far less direct than Leon's first statement. It contains syntactic modifiers to qualify his statements and is far more segmented, with distinct pauses after every few words indicating either continued thought or a careful choice of words. The drawn out word "violence" (line 4) implies that perhaps it is too strong of a term for what he is trying to express. This mediation of language can be viewed as a form of face-saving or an attempt to avoid making a direct connection between enjoying violent games and performing violent actions. Yet, Leon was participating in an interview process with an expectation of honesty and seems to have felt compelled to say "well..." (line 1), implying that he may not want to admit what follows, and then acknowledging that yes, there is a connection. He then repeatedly reverted to the use of hedging statements to distance himself from that initial strong assertion ("definitely a correlation" [line 1]). This distance was achieved through phrases such

as "I don't know" (line 3), "but..." (line 4), and the final lack of conclusion in the confused statement "yeah, I would say" (line 5). Distancing techniques were used regularly by all research participants, most often when they seemed to presume their opinions were discordant with those of the interviewer/listener or with more general expectations of masculinity.

For example, despite the presence of symbols of domination in much of the speech, participants made concerted efforts to distance themselves through their discourse from such overt stereotypes. One participant currently serving in the Middle East, Copper, described his experience of playing the video game *Double Dragon 2*. He expressed dissatisfaction with the cultural expectation that men will take up a violent pursuit to rescue or protect a woman. The woman in the game is positioned as weaker and in need of rescue (a traditional archetype of many stories of heroes). Copper (C) described the game in terms of its narrative content: 1. C: Uh (.) Billy's girlfriend in *Double Dragon 2* gets kidnapped (.); 2. C: or murdered (.) I forget which (1) ...; 3. C: And then he enlists the aid of his brother (.); 4. C: cuz you know, that's what you do...; 5. C: I mean, su::re?; 6. C: Why n::ot (.) What are friends for? The sarcasm, as noted due to his stress of words like "that's" (line 4) and "sure" (line 5), at the end of the statement implies not only that he is using hyperbole, but also that this expectation of machismo is either outdated or overrated. This level of distancing seems to take on a personal tone of disapproval that these masculine ideologies extend beyond the fantasy setting of the game to real-life expectations for appropriate male behavior. Copper cannot recall whether the girlfriend lives or dies, as she is really inconsequential to the process of game play wherein the defeat of enemies is paramount. By asking "what are friends for" (line 6), he removes this narrative from the strictly game-related realm and applies it to his own ideologies of friendship and support, again with a tone that implies his negative opinion of male hegemonic status and certain cultural narratives that go along with it. The roles of males in society are accepted and understood, even internalized, but not condoned through these linguistic devices.

The normative discourses of violence in males are evidenced repeatedly in Western culture in terms of acceptable language use, activity, professional pursuits, and displays of emotion. In a linguistic analysis of men's talk about emotion, Walton, Coyle, and Lyons describe being upset, sad, or afraid as emotions that are only culturally acceptable for men if they are expressed through "anger and violence" (407). Narrative analysts find that male respondents hesitate when asked about emotions such as fear and find that a "major similarity across interviews was the silence that followed the question" about fear (Sandberg and Tollefsen 9). For instance, Copper's discourse describing a part of a violent game that was disturbing to him was expressed as follows: 1. C: Well, I'll tell ya (.) the uh (.); 2. C: and I have been a *Call of Duty* player; 3. C: when *Modern Warfare* I came out, and the thing is...; 4. C: there is a (.) uh, there's the control thing; 5. C: They actually took a moment, took the time to program it; 6. C: so there is a scene where you're sneaking in the jungles of Vietnam...; 7. C: You come up, there's this, um (.) Vietcong in the boat...; 8. C: And you come up and you have to take the joystick; 9. C: and move it this way, like move it (.) circle it around; 10. C: And you come up out of the water and slit the guys throat; 11. C: in the most unbelievably unpleasantly graphic was possible (2); 12. C: And uh (1.5) I found that really unpleasant. This description has hesitation in the form of "uh" and "um" four times, seven distinct pauses, and disjointed sentence structures that implies both great discomfort with the topic at hand and the speaker's clarity of thought in trying to express an emotional reaction of this sort. Detail is provided in terms of the game-play and what the scenario entails, but the only information given about his personal response to that violence (other than what is implied through the irregularity of his speech) is the repetition of the word "unpleasant" in lines 11 and 12, as opposed to other potentially more emotionally evocative adjectives, such as upsetting, disturbing, or troubling. Copper struggles to find a word other than unpleasant to adequately describe his negative emotional response without breaking from the expected norms of masculine discourse. His language remains relatively stoic, focusing on specific details and not shying away from the violent act itself (line 10). However, the meaning is clearly implied through the pacing of his utterances. His lack of smooth, composed speech breaks with stereotypical expectations of emotionless masculinity. Copper does not find this game play to be enjoyable or entertaining. His discomfort is not simply due to a sense that he is sharing inside information that breaks with social norms, but more directly relates to his emotional pain in remembering and relating this play activity, an experience that is very telling of his choices regarding the self-representation of his masculine identity.

Themes of protection and strength were prominent in discourse for all participants as well. When asked whether he enjoyed entertainment with violent themes, George connected his response to his work as a police officer: 1. G: Personally, I think that though lots of humans have become; 2. G: Kind of complacent over the years; 3. G: That deep down we still have this primal urge to go and hunt; 4. G: Believe it or not (laughs); 5. G: And this primal urge to protect (.); 6. G: And since that's not as obvious (.); 7. G: I mean when I was a police officer; 8. G: That was certainly a thing about me that I could foster; 9. G: But um, I think without these outlets for that (referencing games); 10. G: I think we'd have a few more, I guess uh (1); 11. G: I think we'd have a lot more problems in the real world. The choice of terms like "humans" (line 1), as opposed to people or another more casual option, and "primal urge" (repeated in lines 3 and 5) position this discourse in academic or scientific/biological terms despite the fact that it is a personal opinion (as evidenced by the initial phrase "personally, I think" [line 1]). The use of heightened technical discourse, or in this case simply the choice of slightly irregular terminology, implies to the listener that this is intended to be an objective argument that supports ideas that are almost universal, including cultural norms of masculinity.

Most interview participants referenced a similar concept, reaffirming the idea that masculinity requires performance of the role of the protector or hero in their discussion of childhood play and gender self-identification. Heroic Protective Discourse (HPD) as developed by Caroline Dryden, Kathy Doherty, and Paula Nicolson, takes this a step further by positioning the hero beyond traditional conceptions of idealized masculinity in terms of independence and control, and constructs an idea of heroism that takes "on the additional dimension foregrounding the motivation to 'protect'" (193). As the authors note, "HPD refers to a set of interpretive resources and practices that normalize a form of masculine identity that combines physical strength and aggression with the motivation to use physical force in the service of protecting others" (194). This is directly reflected in George's discourse regarding his "urge to protect" (line 5), and also reminiscent of Copper's dissatisfaction with the call to protect in the game *Double Dragon 2*. Participants' discourse supported complex iterations of masculinities expressed through talk about play practices, professional interests, and daily understandings of gender identities and modes of interpersonal interaction.

Masculine discourses expressed through these interviews support traditional cultural values of masculinity in terms of domination, destruction, and strength, which were reproduced at least partially due to the influence of male childhood video game play activities. Verbal expressions of superiority and anger in conversational contexts were more comfortable topics for these speakers. Emotion, narrative, and interpersonal relationships were less comfortable subjects of discussion. Participants demonstrated complex processes of identity construction as evidenced by nuanced switches between discussions of violence in play and in reality. Male hegemony was affirmed but also positioned as a framework to be mocked or disavowed by modern or progressive members of society. Each of the participants distanced themselves to an extent from stereotypes of overt masculine identity but continued to behave and to speak according to them to some extent. This demonstrates their awareness of gendered roles in society and an acute awareness of the controversies surrounding the probable influence of video game player identification on self-identity construction during developmental years.

Any analysis of participants' experiences with video games requires consideration of the concept of player agency. The choice to abide by or challenge rules and expectations for play activities and the inclusion of other players or teammates influences how players see themselves and others in and out of the game world. Modern video games, for example, are shifting away from conceptions of player agency that are bound within a set and limited rules-based environment and are becoming more open (sandbox games). Agency has become more about the freedom to explore the potential of a game in unexpected ways, as evidenced within the work of Karen and Joshua Tanenbaum ("Agency as Commitment to Meaning"). This shift in play—especially the ability to choose or alter game play—will change the ways in which digital interactive play engages social structures of masculinity and will also alter the ways in which the influences of the medium are manifested in the personal gender identity construction of its players. In my further research I will explore the ways in which these changes in play have influenced the internalization of game experiences for children growing up while playing games (interactive video and otherwise) from more recent decades. Do themes of video game play still influence the construction of traditional hegemonic masculine identity?

An obvious omission in this research is the female gamer and the relation of play practices of girls to identity construction. This preliminary study focused solely on male discourse as a function of traditional Western male stereotypes and cultural expectations of masculinity with regards to violence. The different forms of masculine identity expressed by interview participants were analyzed in keeping with an acknowledgment of a "fluidity of masculinities [that] recreates power relationships between males ... [and then] reinvents itself in discourses of hegemonic masculinity through its vested interest in violence" (Hatchell 388). Female discourses of play would provide insight into these processes of masculinity as well, and are becoming the focus of much research especially regarding the influences of media that are portrayed in popular culture as being predominantly male, such as video games.

In conclusion, intentionally limited and specific in its focus, this case study provides insight into the ways in which boys who grew up playing the first widely available video game systems internalize social expectations of masculine identity through video game play. Heteronormativity was confirmed as a factor in the identity construction of video game players, yet complex cultural ideologies that influence gender identity construction resulted in the distancing and disavowal of traditional stereotypes, allowing space for the expression of multiple masculinities. In further analyses of the present data I will explore relationships between discourses of gaming and gender self-identification in terms of contextual structures such as generational, cultural, and geographic differences among the population interviewed in this research.

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