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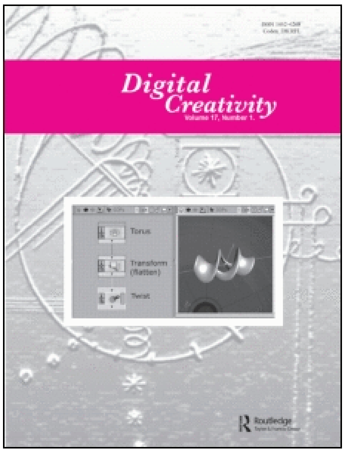

Digital Creativity

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t714576173

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Online publication date: 10 December 2009

To cite this Article Taylor, Nicholas, Jenson, Jen and de Castell, Suzanne(2009) 'Cheerleaders/booth babes/ *Halo* hoes: pro-gaming, gender and jobs for the boys', Digital Creativity, 20: 4, 239 — 252

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14626260903290323

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14626260903290323

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Digital Creativity
2009, Vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 239–252

Cheerleaders/booth babes/*Halo* hoes: pro-gaming, gender and jobs for the boys

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Abstract

In recent years, a 'professional' digital gaming industry has emerged in North America: this interconnected series of organisations and leagues host competitive gaming tournaments (often televised) in which young, mostly male participants compete for increasingly lucrative prize money and sponsorship contracts. Taking up Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter's (2005) challenge to confront the ways girl gamers are rendered 'invisible' by gamers, researchers and designers, this paper maps the various ways women participate in a set of practices around the organisation, promotion and performance of competitive gaming, framed as the exclusive domain of (young, straight, middle class) male bodies. Mothers flying their sons' teams to events all over North America, female players participating in tournaments or promotional models operating sponsorship booths, the women who participate in competitive gaming tournaments negotiate different expectations and carry out different kinds of embodied work. Each of these 'roles', however, is tenuously maintained within a community that most commonly reads female participation in sexualised terms: mothers at events describe themselves as 'cheerleaders', female players risk being labelled as '*halo* hoes' and promotional models become 'booth babes'.

Keywords: e-Sports, gender, competitive gaming, ethnography

1 Introduction

This paper explores the gendered discursive and material terrains of an emergent industry and culture supporting the professionalisation of videogames. We focus on 'women's roles' within a cultural re-formation of digital-game-play-as-work that encompasses, significantly, law, ethics, economics and politics. The larger theoretical problem addressed here is located at the conceptual borderlines of 'work' and 'play'[1] and this ethnographic case study of the professionalising of *Halo 3* play. We follow a group of young, highly successful would-be pro-gamers across local, national and international LAN (Local Area Network) tournaments, illuminating the gendered character of emergent forms of digital game play now being directly modelled upon the widespread and well-accepted cultural transformation of participatory sport into a highly rewarded, low participation spectatorial activity, in which most men, and almost all women, are relegated, albeit differently, to the sidelines. This case study is based on fieldwork from an audio-visual ethnography of competitive *Halo 3* tournaments at three different sites: a small-scale LAN (Local Area Network) club called 'NerdCorps'[2], the 2008 Major League Gaming (MLG) Toronto Open and the 2008 World Cyber Games (WCG) in Cologne, Germany.

How are 'pro-gamers' actively trying to reinvent themselves and being encouraged, and rewarded for doing so? The focus in this ethnographic study, which followed the same core group of young Canadian competitive *Halo 3* gamers from the NerdCorps events, to MLG's national (and nationally-broadcast) stage, to the international spectacle of WCG 2008, is on the

DOI: 10.1080/14626260903290323

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'professionalisation' of digital gaming. The gamers involved are interviewed, observed, recorded and focused inquiry is carried out on how 'professional' gamers are represented and discursively constructed through websites, journalistic accounts, promotional materials and secondary interviews (with associates, friends, relatives, and, importantly also, 'fans' of gamers)—which position competitive gaming as the exclusive domain of young men who best embody a 'hypermasculine'[3] subject position. The performance of pro-gamer masculinity is premised on technological mastery and on an overt (often highly manufactured) connection of 'pro-gaming' to the male-dominated world of professional sports. In this account, we ask how this discourse is taken up, rehearsed and disrupted by the NerdCorps gamers who congregate at a local LAN in a large urban center, and document when and where participants perform and make use of the gendered discourses of competitive gaming.

Like Janet Schofield's investigation of computer use in schools in *Computers and classroom culture* (1995), the study we report on does not set gender disparities in competitive gaming as its primary focus. Rather, the ways this emergent culture limits opportunities for female participation became increasingly apparent, the more we followed a group of players to local and then national and international competitive gaming tournaments. Instead of describing and detailing informants—players and spectators—who are almost all male, this paper examines where and how the few women involved in or even *observed* over the course of this study find and/or create a place for themselves within this almost exclusively male setting of emergent gamer 'professionalisation'. In doing so, we hope to take up Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter's (2005) challenge to confront the ways women involved in gaming cultures are rendered 'invisible' by researchers, marketers, designers and players themselves. Focusing specifically on 'Fatal Fantasy', the only female NerdCorps member, who regularly attends and competes in the masculinised culture around competitive *Halo 3* play, we show the ways in which she attempts to retain—indeed accentuate—heteronormative sexuality and femininity. We then describe some of the more conventional forms of 'women's work' in relation to competitive gaming tournaments and to a community that largely reads womens' participation in sexualised terms: either as 'cheerleaders' for their male partners/relations or as promotional 'booth babes' whose 'sales pitch' overtures and invitations provide an interactive staging for affirmations of male heterosexuality in a male-dominated space. These case stories of the few women who actually attended these tournaments, either as players or in more supportive roles as 'cheerleaders' or 'booth babes', serve as illustrative examples of the highly-constrained opportunities for women that we observed at local, national and international tournaments. These specific observations gain additional significance in the context of the re-conceptualisation of digital gaming as a form of professional sport, rather than recreation. Our study suggests that the 'e-Sports' industry may be replicating the same ornamental[4] (i.e., cheerleaders, *Sports Illustrated*'s swimsuit issue, etc.) and secondary[5] role of women well established in the domain of professional sports. This pattern does not bode well at all for the increasing involvement of women in digital games.

2 Games as toys for boys: Background and context

Male 'ownership' over both the production and mainstream consumption of digital play has been thoroughly documented (de Castell and Bryson 1998; Fron et al. 2007; Kennedy 2002; Taylor 2007). Despite commercial gaming industry's attempts to entice, through new configurations of hardware and software, new 'casual' (read: older and/or female) gamers (Jenson, de Castell and Fisher 2007), games largely continue to be made by and for males[6].

Academic attempts at addressing this problem have convincingly connected gender imbalances around gaming to diminished vocational (Beavis and Charles 2007, Burrelli 2008; Kramarae 2001; Stabiner 2003) and educational (Jenson and de Castell 2005; Kafai 1995) opportunities for women. Competitive gaming is a domain in which these disparities are significantly re-entrenched: since the inception of the Cyberathlete Professional League (the first 'pro gaming' organisation) in early 2001, the prizes, endorsements and sponsorships thus far offered by the competitive gaming industry and its various organisations and tournaments have been overwhelmingly awarded to males[7].

This study of competitive gaming is situated alongside other socio-cultural accounts of gender and digital play that are characterised by a methodological sensitivity to poststructuralist notions of gender as contingent, embodied and performative (Beavis and Charles 2007; Bryce and Rutter 2005; Carr 2006; Jenson, de Castell and Fisher 2007; Taylor 2007). Gender so viewed is not a stable set of biologically-determined characteristics, from which arise 'gender-appropriate' roles, dispositions, abilities, etc., but instead as always already constructed. The former is a normative position in much work on gender and gaming that, as de Castell and Jenson (forthcoming) point out, invariably positions women as 'naturally' lacking the inclination or competency to 'seriously' play games.

We draw from Connell's (1987; 2005) work on masculinities that identifies and problematises forms of gendered identity that are based on, and further entrench, what she calls the "patriarchical dividend" (Connell 2005, p. 79)—i.e., the social, political, economic and emotional entitlements and privileges that come from the historical and ongoing subjugation and marginalisation of women, often convergent with racial and ethnic forms of domination and oppression. Using this lens, competitive gaming is viewed as a discursive terrain in which boys' long-standing privilege with regards to digital play is valorised and rewarded as 'virtual' athleticism.

3 Gamers as 'cyber-athletes'

The predecessors to corporatised tournaments like the World Cyber Games (WCG) and Major League Gaming (MLG) are gaming arcades, LAN cafés and LAN parties (Pasley 2008). These spaces have been characterised as largely male-dominated sites where young men 'play out' their gendered identity work through performing mastery over digital games (Alloway and Gilbert 1998; Beavis and Charles 2007; Taylor 2005. MLG and WCG tournaments operate like large-scale LANs, where the structure, rules and games played are sponsored and run by corporations[8]. As Michael Kane (2008) notes, these organisations and their sponsors are heavily invested in selling competitive gaming to a televised audience that extends well beyond the relatively small numbers of competitive players. To do so, they mimic the imagery, language, and organisational structures of professional sports, constructing and reconstructing a sports-oriented discourse that valorises aggression and competitiveness, elevates game skill to the level of athleticism and presents few opportunities or agency for female participation in the physical 'arenas' of these corporatised LANs[9]. At WCG and MLG events, the central theme—gaming as masculine 'e-Sport'—is ubiquitous. The main promotional video for WCG Cologne, for example, showed highlights of participants, always male, intensely watching their screens, celebrating victories and agonising over defeats, while a male voiceover describes gamers as the "cyber-athletes of the 21st century". At MLG Toronto, this invocation of corporatised athleticism was even more explicit, with massive banners flanking the main stage depicting (male) pros[10], shot from below, clutching Xbox 360 controllers, their faces glowering at the camera (Figure 1) and cameos

Figure 1. Banners of pros at MLG Toronto.

by former NFL athletes, to commentators' celebration of individual players' skills and feats. Even the MLG logo mimics North American sports organisations (Figure 2). These material and discursive links to a mainstream pro sports industry seem aimed at converting what has, since its recognition by mainstream media and academia, been regarded as an "*un*popular culture" (de Castell & Jenson 2003), associated with inactivity, apathy and anti-sociality, into something that is not only financially lucrative, but active, 'athletic', and worthy of (sports) spectatorship.

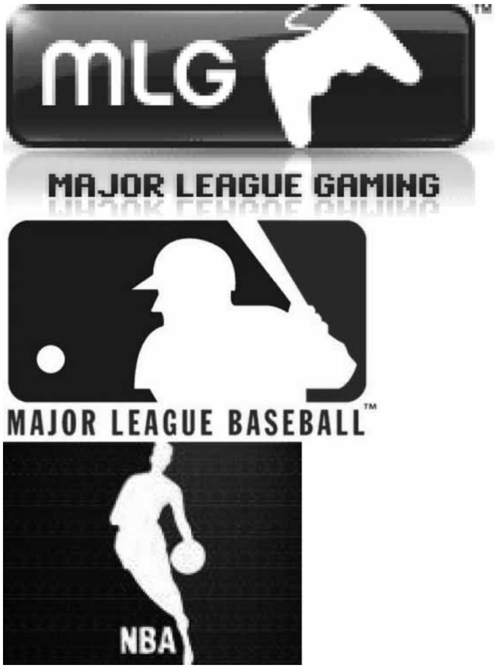

Figure 2. The MLG logo—an Xbox 360 controller replaces silhouetted athletes. Logos © Major League Gaming, Major League Baseball and National Basketball Association.

The link between gaming and sport is carried out not only through the imagery and language of the LAN tournaments gamers attend, but is enacted *bodily*, as well. Players are often described (by each other, journalists and promoters), as athletes, young men with competitive 'natures' whose desire for competition somehow transfers to, and is satisfied by, competitive gaming. In *Game Boys*, for instance, an expose on competitive *Counter-Strike* (CS) play in the U.S., Michael Kane repeatedly plays up his subjects' involvement in athletics; the coach of the CS team he focuses his account on is an ex-college football player (p. 110), while the team's star player was an accomplished athlete in high-school until injuries put a halt to his career (p. 112). Largely on the basis of these two examples, Kane claims "CS is for athletes too old for the junior varsity team and not good enough to make varsity. So they get their competitive fix where they can, in e-Sports" (p. 113). However tautological this line of reasoning may be ('pro-gaming is athletic, because those that play it are athletes'), it works to buttress the idea that gamers are athletes: competitive gaming is another outlet for their 'inherent' competitive drive.

Similarly, in competitive gaming journalism and on official websites, those who play are described as possessing game-related skills analogous to those developed in 'real life', male-dominated professional sports. Kane, for instance, notes that the former star athlete and *Counterstrike* star is highly regarded in the competitive CS community for his skills with the sniper rifle. Kane even suggests a degree of transfer between the skills required for baseball pitching and those demanded of CS sniping

(p. 157). Further, the MLG website offers a series of training videos by a Dr. Pepper-sponsored player, ‘TSquared’, in which he explains how to improve one’s game through working on one’s “shot”. Also on the website is an interview with MLG pro ‘Strongside’ who describes a players’ progression as if he were a dedicated athlete, citing the “daily training regimen” he underwent in order to “refine” his “raw talent” (http://www.mlgpro.com/?q=pro/strongside). Perhaps the strongest comment linking competitive gaming to masculinised sport, however, was during a telephone interview with a highly-successful player from NerdCorps, where the young man remarked that women simply lacked the “testosterone” to compete on a level playing field with men, in *competitive gaming*. Here, one of the club’s more charismatic and ‘high-profile’ players invokes the same pseudo-science used to keep women out of violent sport (McDonagh and Pappano 2008), but in the context of an activity which shares none of the same physical or athletic demands.

Through these semiotic (logos and posters), rhetorical (‘e-Sports and cyber athletes’) and ideological (“women lack the testosterone to game”) strategies, organisations, promoters and (some) players connect competitive gaming to a professional, mainstream North American sports industry that continues to be dominated by males, whether as spectators, athletes, or commentators (Brackenbridge 2002 ; Grindstaff and West 2006; Messner 2002, 2007; Waitt 2008). In the face (and often in spite) of ongoing attempts to open professional sports (and its lucrative rewards) to female participation, the North American sports-media industry continues to valorise and reward ‘hypermasculine’ traits: physical violence against self and others, aggression, individual skill, and the desire and ability to inflict pain and humiliation over those less capable (Messner 2002, 2007; Welch 1997). These traits are framed as quintessentially and exclusively masculine: women (and most men) simply lack the physical capability or ‘guts’ to participate on equal terms, even as female athletes continue to undermine the physiological rationales for such claims (McDonagh and Pappano 2008). By invoking *this* particular sporting tradition[11], then, the North American pro gaming industry constructs a similarly misogynistic and exclusionary terrain—one in which, for instance, the assertion that women do not have the testosterone required for elite video game play can somehow be offered as a plausible explanation for lack of female involvement.

4 Where the women are(n’t)

This section explores the various ways women marginally participate in a set of practices around the organisation, promotion and performance of competitive gaming, framed as the exclusive domain of (young, straight, middle class) males. The women we observed participating in competitive gaming tournaments negotiate different expectations and carry out different kinds of embodied work, from female players participating in tournaments, mothers flying their sons’ teams to events all over North America, or promotional models operating sponsorship booths. Each of these ‘roles’, however, is tenuously maintained within a community that most commonly reads female participation in sexualised terms: female players risk being labelled as ‘*Halo* hoes’, mothers at events describe themselves as ‘cheerleaders’, and promotional models become ‘booth babes’—all supportive, subordinate roles.

4.1 ‘Fatal Fantasy’

The lone female regular at NerdCorps events, and one of the few female players at MLG Toronto, Fatal Fantasy is an anomaly in the North American competitive *Halo 3* LAN scene. She occupies what seems to be a contradictory position within a male-dominated community, presenting herself as both a desirable heterosexual female and as a competent competitive gamer, fully capable of ‘playing with the boys’.

Fatal Fantasy is a Caucasian 17-year old high school student, who regularly attended NerdCorps events for over 2 years. On top of her extensive involvement with NerdCorps, she had also been to several MLG tournaments. While her teams did not place well in these tournaments, she is relatively successful at NerdCorps events, particularly in the ‘Free For All’ portions (FFA, where 8 players face off against one another to determine who gets the most kills against each other)—she placed first in round-robin FFA play at the first event Taylor attended in March 2008, marking the first time at a NerdCorps event that a female player achieved this success. She is among the more vocal players during either FFA or team play, loudly dispensing strategies as well as taunts and trash-talking. One clip from the study, taken from the team finals of the March 2008 event, shows her acting as primary ‘strat’ (strategy) caller and chastising a fellow player, ‘Burns’, for his poor communication. She tells him “I’ll kill you if you do that at Meadow”, referring to the upcoming Meadowlands MLG event where the two teamed up. At another point in the clip, she exclaims to all of her teammates (as well as their opponents), “Look who we’re losing to!”, urging her teammates on through the humiliating possibility of losing to a clearly inferior team.

In this and similar instances, Fatal Fantasy shows herself to be a competent gamer and a dominant presence at NerdCorps events. Through her vocalised and embodied derision (in the above account) she positions herself as an accomplished and demanding teammate. Her performance as a self-assured female *Halo 3* player complicates a discourse in which, by virtue of its connections to masculinised cultures of both mainstream sports and gaming, competitive *Halo 3* is configured as the exclusive domain of young men. Her participation further stresses that there is nothing in terms of gameplay—the technological skills required, the intensive communication and coordination demanded of team play, or the stresses of competition—that are ‘inherently’ masculine. Instead, it is the discourse that links competitive gaming with a misogynistic (and homophobic) sports tradition that makes her identity as a ‘good girl gamer’ so tenuous and contingent.

By her own account, Fatal Fantasy does well in school, and as she described to Taylor, her parents allow her to participate intensively in competitive *Halo 3* play (including attending MLG tournaments all over North America) so long as she maintains good grades. This disclosure is in stark contrast to the majority of male NerdCorps participants Taylor talked to, who neither mentioned their schoolwork nor seemed to have their competitive gaming activities parentally fettered by or contingent upon schoolwork. Fatal informed Taylor that while her parents do not accompany her on her travels to MLG events in the U.S., they trust her to “be good” and to avoid trouble, and they have met, and place trust in, the close male friends she travels with (including Burns), unaccompanied by parents. On both points—her schoolwork and her assurances of ‘proper’ behaviour—Fatal discussed concerns rarely, if never, heard from male players in similar conversations about their participation in competitive gaming. Whether or not she is alone among NerdCorps participants in having to bargain with her parents over her pastime or the costly traveling it entails, the fact that this was so central to the ways she described herself perhaps reflects her perceived need to legitimate her play. Other researchers of gender and gaming have noted that young women tend to do more work justifying and legitimating their gameplay habits than men do, perhaps owing to and reflecting the ways gaming technologies—and leisure time in general—are withheld more for females than males (Jenson, de Castell and Fisher 2007; Walkerdine 2007; Carr 2006).

4.2 “Just there to game”

Fatal Fantasy’s gamer tag evokes a persona that is at once desirable and unattainable, and captures the kind of gendered identity she seems to try to maintain as one of the few female competitive gamers in the large city in which she lives. While male participants at NerdCorps events generally showed up to events in casual athletic wear (jerseys or hooded sweatshirts, baggy t-shirts, jogging or track pants), Fatal seemed to put more effort into her ‘look’—make-up, scarves and dresses. Similarly, she was alone among participants to adopt and consistently use a sexualised gamer tag (though on several occasions, male NerdCorps participants would jokingly and temporarily use tags that sexualized other male participants). These might be attempts to ‘own’ her sexuality, to make it visible on her terms or it could be ‘read’ as an attempt by Fatal to re-invoke, in a dominant male space, a heterosexual identity that demanded, at its most basic level, recognition of her as not just ‘one of the boys’.

In a conversation with Taylor at one of the last NerdCorps events he attended, Fatal described her participation in the male-dominated NerdCorps community and her interactions with other (casual) female participants, in ways that positioned her as a desirable woman who is nonetheless ‘off limits’ to male players. She recounted a story about another young woman who used to attend NerdCorps events regularly; according to Fatal, the young woman was infatuated with one of the more successful NerdCorps regulars, leading to a sexual encounter at an event in Fall 2007. She described the animosity the other girl had towards her, stating the other girl thought they were in “competition” for young men at the club. Fatal used this anecdote as a way to re-affirm that “she’s only there to game”.

At stake in this conversation was Fatal’s ongoing attempt to position herself within this community in which young women are most often configured as ‘*Halo* hoes’ (young women who, according to male NerdCorps organisers and many players, just show up to LAN tournaments to flirt with and ‘pick up’ successful or victorious male gamers). Taylor further understood this conversation within the context of his own position as an older male and as a researcher and documenter of a set of practices in which she has much invested. As an older man, someone who had been very visibly taking notes and filming her and her peers’ play, and who was also friendly with and ‘in’ with the organisers, Taylor became implicated and involved in Fatal’s gendered identity work. It seemed important to her that he understand she is not a ‘*Halo* ho’ and there for the right reasons—i.e. “just to game”.

That she did so through articulating a story of another young woman whom she describes and depicts as a ‘*Halo* ho’, however, perhaps points to the complex and tenuous conditions for young women’s equitable participation in this culture. Fatal articulated her own ‘safe’ and legitimate gendered identity primarily by contrasting her motives for coming to events against *other* young women who are just there “to pick up guys”. The discursive construction of ‘*Halo* hoes’ simultaneously positions women as sexualised objects, incapable of participating on equal terms with men, while at the same time constructs ‘pro’ gamers as young, sexually desirable straight males.

In the next section, we turn to other instances of female participation—one at MLG Toronto, the other at WCG Germany—to show how in a globalised community which positions women as sexualized and only marginal participants, the subject position Fatal has developed for herself, while no means unproblematic, is certainly an accomplishment, in so far as she is able to actively and competently participate and take pleasure in *Halo 3* LAN tournaments.

4.3 ‘Cheerleader’

During a break in play at MLG Toronto[12], in which several of the NerdCorps players took part, Taylor approached one of the few women actually 'on the floor' of the event, a tall, tanned, middle-aged Caucasian woman and introduced himself as a university researcher. She responded by introducing herself as 'Status' Mom', referring to her son's gamer tag, and described herself as the "cheerleader" for her son's team, Against the Odds. Status' Mom said she knows "all about MLG", having been to several events in both the 2007 and 2008 seasons. When asked how many events she has been to with her son's team, she replied "most of them", and said that she had even taken out an equity loan to in 2007 to fly her son's team to events, emphasising the lengths she has gone to support her son and his team. Once the next round of play began, Status' Mom began her 'cheerleading' work. Figure 4 shows a "semiotic score", generated with the Multimodal Application Program (MAP) for visually coding video data[13], of her verbal and nonverbal encouragements. This 'thick depiction' of the choreography between her and her son's team shows a steady stream of clapping and comments either spurring the entire team or specific players. In the attached image from the clip, (Figure 3), Status' Mom is gazing at her son's team.

This chart illustrates Status' Mom's limited and ambivalent form of participation. She engages in an almost constant pattern of clapping, calling out her son and his teammates using the same stock phrases ("Come on" or "Let's go") and occasionally shouting a violent (possibly ironic) phrase like "Kill them all!" or "Kill the enemy!" Her cheering has little to no correlation to what is actually occurring on-screen or to the actions and utterances of the boys she cheers. Instead, one way of understanding her cheering is to read it as a performance of 'cheering'—publicly demonstrating her support of her son's activity, which actually extends well beyond her presence at the event (having paid her son's airfare, lodging and entry fees). It might also be possible to see her performance as one of *acting* interested in the game in order to *become*, or at least appear, interested, much like a student taking copious notes at a lecture in order to stay awake[14]. Meantime, the boys—Status included—seem neither able nor inclined to pay attention to her, their headphones on and their gazes rarely leaving each other's screens.

Unlike the other mothers that we noted at these events (no more than five in total), Status' Mom and her participation in her son's gaming

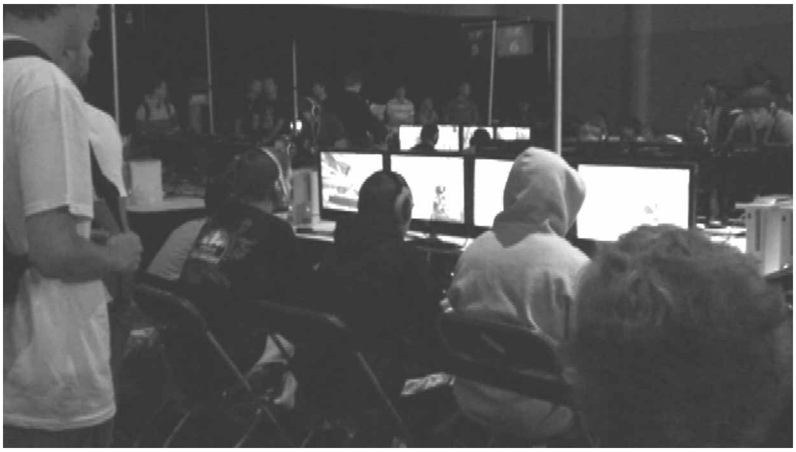

Figure 3. 'Status' Mom'(her head is on the right) acting as team 'cheerleader'.

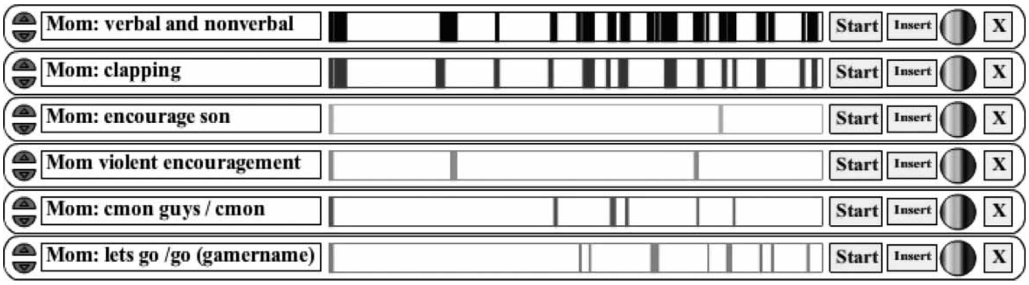
Mom: verbal and nonverbal
Mom: clapping
Mom: encourage son
Mom violent encouragement
Mom: cmon guys / cmon
Mom: lets go /go (gamername)
Start
Insert
X

Figure 4. Verbal and non-verbal encouragement.

is clearly visible. At the same time, however, she does not ‘follow’ her son’s play, nor does she seem to participate in the ‘discourse’ of the game, instead configuring her participation as *cheerleading*, invoking a practice historically linked to male-dominated sports in which women are kept literally on the margins, capable of only superficially supporting or buttressing the ‘real’ action rather than participating equitably in it (Grindstaff and West 2006). Her ‘cheerleading’ not only underscores the larger attempt by marketers of pro-gaming to legitimate it as sport, but also re-inscribes the character of roles available for females as being to shore up, rather than either to participate in or indeed to threaten, masculinised identity work.

4.4 ‘Booth babes’

If players’ mothers and female players face difficulties in negotiating the hypermasculinised terrain of pro-gaming, there is one mode of female participation at both WCG and MLG that seems sanctioned, even eagerly welcomed, by male participants: ‘booth babes’, women who facilitate male participants’ engagements with a range of products (primarily digital technologies) at promotional exhibits scattered throughout events.[15] At the World Cyber Games in Cologne[16], promotional booths were set up throughout the ground floor and each featured young, slender, predominantly Caucasian women, dressed to match the booth or company’s theme. For instance, at the station for graphics chip maker ATI, whose mascot is a computer graphics image of a buxom woman in Burlesque clothing, models wore fishnet stockings, tight black leather or PVC and black or red wigs. The models’ responsibilities included standing by the product, greeting and handing out brochures to passers-by, running product demonstrations, and posing for photographs either by themselves or with their colleagues and/or attendees.

The imperative for these employees seems to be ‘look at but don’t talk to’. In a video clip from the final day of the World Cyber Games, two women are stationed at the Ferrari booth on either side of the red sports car on display, while two young men sit side-by-side in the car, playing each other in the cellphone-based racing game *Asphalt 4*. Figure 5 shows the two women; dressed in racing-themed jackets and hotpants, posing while a crowd of male spectators looks on, the racing match broadcast screens at the front of the exhibit.

Halfway through the clip the two players finish their match and a male employee pulls the next round of male players up and seats them in the car. The women continue to stand, hands on their hips, facing the crowd. They occasionally look at each other to make comments (in German), but otherwise, they remain relatively still, standing beside the technological spectacle of a racing game being played in a ‘real’ sports car, while their male colleague sets up competition between male players in front of a crowd of male spectators.

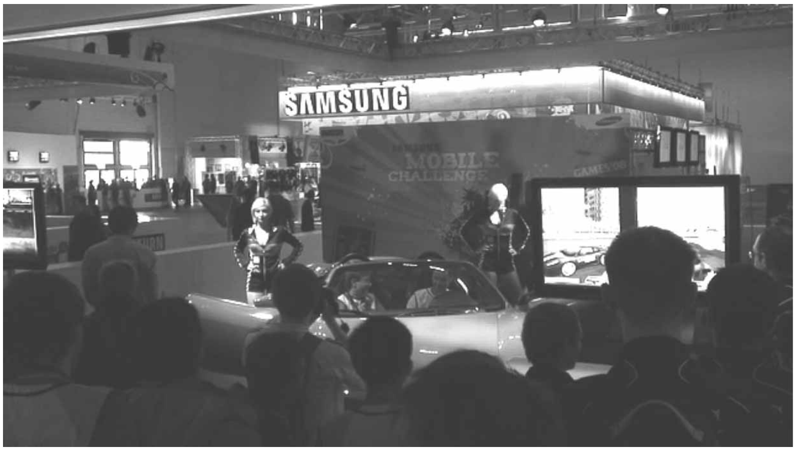

Figure 5. Booth babes modelling the *Asphalt* 4 stage.

In *Game boys*, Michael Kane (2008) begins to touch on the significance these women hold in the world of competitive gaming. Describing ESPN's broadcast of the inaugural (now-defunct) Championship Gaming Series tournament in 2007, Kane claims that by working "a few cute girls into the broadcast", tournament organisers—with much invested in selling gaming as legitimate sport—"help push the message that gamers, despite the stereotype, are not nerdy" (Kane 2008, p. 232). In Kane's analysis, the presence of sexualised women works to further forge the discursive connection between gamers and athletes. While this insight might begin to explain the presence of booth babes at events like MLG and WCG, it may not go far enough in accounting for their importance to a techno culture as intensely male-dominated as WCG. Instead of seeing these women as simply shoring up a discursive link between competitive gaming and/as 'athletics', it might be more productive to see them as guarding an intensely "homosocial" (Willis 1991) space from homosexual desire. In other words, the presence of highly sexualised women ensures for the male attendees that their heterosexual desire is firmly secured and on display: even more so, given that these women are 'available' to take pictures of/with. Their presence, and the kinds of agency required of them, helps facilitate attendees' spectatorial engagements with typically masculinised technologies in ways that affirm, rather than threaten, a ideological link between heteronormative masculinity and technological competence (Wjacman 1991).

5 Conclusion

These previous examples of 'cheerleaders' and 'booth babes' are meant to illustrate the very limited kinds of positionalities made available to the few women who participated in the local, national and international gaming tournaments this study reports on. They emphasise Fatal Fantasy's accomplishment as a competent, albeit tenuous, participant in the local and national competitive gaming scene, by exploring the normative conditions by which women are rendered (in)visible in this community. Status' Mom's self-described role of 'cheerleader', when in fact her efforts to facilitate her son's team's involvement means she's more like a 'general manager' or 'team owner', points to the kinds of constrained participation made available to mothers of competitive gamers. Unlike the largely invisible forms of support offered by parents, the ubiquity of 'booth babes' at MLG and particularly WCG suggests that the pro-gaming discourse outlined here does enable, perhaps even require, some form of highly-visible female participation—but one informed by a mandate to be seen and not heard, and to facilitate, rather than control or regulate men's access to the digital technologies they only very indirectly 'sell'.

In light of these other, more sanctioned and more marginal, forms of female inclusion made available within, and *in the service of*, this masculinised technoculture, Fatal Fantasy's ongoing participation is a welcome anomaly. It is by no means either straightforward or unproblematic, however. Her own participation involves considerable socio-economic and racial privilege, as well as the re-inscription (by her disassociation from it) of the deeply misogynistic construction of '*Halo* hoes', based on the notion that women are there to 'pick up'. While she repeatedly makes clear, verbally, that she is "only there to game", at the same time she plays up and performs a subjectivity that seems otherwise thoroughly rooted in heteronormative canons of femininity, as if enjoying and being good at gaming are her only major transgressions within a heteronormative gender order. Fatal's identity as a competitive gamer, like all subject positions that, in one way or another, transgress hierarchies otherwise rigidly maintained (Butler 1999; Connell 2005), particularly around the use of an access to digital technologies (de Castell and Bryson 1998), appears highly contingent and fraught with contradictions.

Evoking the symbols and structures of a mainstream sports discourse that bases continued male domination (and privilege) on an alleged physiological superiority of men over women, the 'cyber athleticism' touted by the 'e-Sports' industry is emptied out of the very things believed to separate male from female physiology (such as musculature, resistance to pain, etc., McDonagh and Pappano 2008). In its place are abilities that are only 'masculine' by virtue of the fact that they are *virtual*—i.e., rooted in long-standing patterns of male privilege with regards to digital games. Competitive gaming and mainstream sports may therefore be *most* alike in the ways both naturalise a discursive connection between masculinity, competition and athleticism. Both domains offer rationales for a grossly *un*level "playing field" (Wachs 2002), where claims about what *women lack*—competence, interest, inclination, ability - are put forward as physiological or psychological differences between sexes, bolstered by discursive, material and behavioural enactments of subordinated, supportive roles for women. That these allegedly inherent sex-based differences have been thoroughly undermined by not-so-recent developments in gender theory, which has shown them to be either grossly overstated or the outright fabricated "phantasms" (Butler 1993) of a hierarchical gender order invested in keeping women in their place, seems to have had little impact on the conditions for female participation either in sports, gaming, or their emergent hybrid offspring, 'e-Sports'.

Notes

[1] While researchers of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) have for some time now explored the 'blurring' of work and play in games like *EverQuest* (Taylor 2006a; Yee 2006), *World of Warcraft* (Taylor 2006b), and *Ultima Online* (Dibbell 2006), very little research has been done with players for whom digital gaming is a *vocation*, as it is for many competitive gamers aspiring to become professional.

[2] We have changed the name of the organisation, as well as the 'gamer tags' (the 'handles' players use at tournaments) of NerdCorps players; all other names (of 'professional' players and of larger-scale leagues and tournaments) have not been changed.

[3] See, for example, Bryson 1987; Connell 1987; Curry 2002; Welch 1997.

[4] Cheerleaders in professional men's leagues like the NBA and NFL, and *Sports Illustrated*'s swimsuit issue, are two examples.

[5] Women's leagues such as the WNBA, LPGA, etc., have traditionally and continue to gain less

attention, media coverage and financial support than their male counterparts (McDonagh and Pappano 2008).

[6] A 2005 report by the International Game Developers Association finds that women constitute only 11.5% of the games industry workforce (http://www.igda.org/diversity/report.php), while a *Los Angeles Times* article from 2008 claims that only 3% of game programmers are women (Pham 2008). Research group NPD reports that while more women are playing console games—presumably because of the *Wii*—they make up only 28% of console gamers (Riley 2009). Finally, Jillian Winn and Carrie Heeter (2009) report that significant gender differences in play persist across almost all game platforms and can be at least partially attributable to inequities in male vs. female leisure time.

[7] The 2008 World Cyber Games tournament in Cologne, Germany, for example, featured bronze, silver and gold medals for 11 single-player games, 2 four-player games and 1 two-player game: 63 players received medals. Not *one* was female.

[8] Major sponsors include Samsung, for the WCG, and Microsoft, for MLG, and other digital technology producers. Ford and Zellers (a department store chain) are also significant and highly visible sponsors of MLG tournaments.

[9] Or, for that matter, in the lives of dedicated 'pros'. In an interview posted on MLG's website MLG-sponsored player "Strongside" says that competitive *Halo 3* gaming has taught him invaluable "life lessons on how to deal with women. . . Make sure they know *Halo* comes first. haha :)" (http://www.mlgpro.com/?q=pro/strongside).

[10] North America's most prominent competitive gaming league, Major League Gaming runs an annual 'Pro Circuit', a series of tournaments for 4-person team *Halo 3* play in different cities around North America. The top 16 teams at the end of the Pro Circuit are designated as 'professional' teams by MLG. A handful of individuals and teams are awarded lucrative, and exclusive, sponsorships with MLG; league contracts specify that players/teams cannot play in other competitive gaming events.

[11] As opposed to, for instance, an Olympic model of 'amateur' athletics, which the World Cyber Games invokes (Hutchins 2008).

[12] The 2008 MLG Toronto Open took place over a weekend in late summer and attracted over 500 Canadian and U.S. *Halo 3* players (128 teams of four) who competed for the top prize of $20 000 (U.S.). The Toronto event was part of the six-city 2008 'Pro Circuit', culminating in the National Finals in Las Vegas to determine the overall winning team for 2008 (http://www.mlgpro.com/procircuit/2008).

[13] See de Castell, Jenson, Taylor, and Lindo (2007) and Taylor (2007) for a more detailed discussion and deployment of the MAP tool.

[14] See, for example, Mundsack, Deese, and Deese (2002), *How to study*.

[15] 'Booth babes' are a common site at game development industry gatherings as well, such as the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), Tokyo Game Show, and Game Developers Conference (GDC).

[16] The World Cyber Games are an annual, four-day event, consisting of tournaments for multiple games on multiple platforms (the 2008 Games featured 16 titles, or 'disciplines'). Tournament participants (over 800, in 2008) are chosen by a series of local and national qualifying competitions. Where MLG invokes a North American sports industry, WCG mimics the ritual and imagery of the Olympics.

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