Framing the Gamer:
A Study of Invented Marginality

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ABSTRACT

Since 2014, discussions about gamer identity have been topical, and they remain so. Recently, for instance, *Real Games* traces the boundaries of what 'counts' as real games (Consalvo & Paul, 2019), for a 'gamer' subculture that is uniquely tied to its medium of choice. The issue of 'gamer' identity has been a subject of study since at least 1983 (Kiesler, et al.); and analyses of the oversexualization of women have appeared since Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkin's *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (1998). Later, studies regarding gender, race, sexuality and class have followed suit (cf. Leonard, 2006; Hitchens, 2011; Shaw, 2014). Indeed, much scholarship suggests a split, on the one hand, between the overrepresentation of white, male, cis-gendered heterosexual player identities within games; and, on the other hand, the actual diverse player base that supports and plays these games (e.g., IGDA, 2019). If gamer culture is perhaps unfairly seen by male gamers as the site of paradoxically marginalized, white male "nerds" (cf. Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2012), it remains relevant, but unclear, how this nonetheless hegemonic identity was constructed.

Historical game scholarship suggests that such identities were formed long before the internet afforded a global community to collectively co-construct such a subcultural identity (e.g., Kocurek, 2015; Therrien). More particularly, the inspection of game magazines suggests that "gamers" were quintessentially constructed in the 80s and early 90s, as game magazines targeted and thereby created a male-dominated and sexist target audience in local (national) contexts (Kirkpatrick, 2015; Therrien & Lefebvre, 2017). Additionally, this calls to attention the local and often ethnocentric contexts in which

games were made and marketed for a specific audience (e.g., Mukherjee, 2017; Švelch, 2018; Wolf, 2015), and the role that paratexts have played therein (Consalvo, 2017).

POWER UNLIMITED (1993-1998)

In our work we take up this call to attention, in order to empirically re-construct how gamer identity was formed in one such context, namely the small context of the Dutch-speaking gaming market. How was 'gamer identity' constructed outside of the anglosphere through one dominant magazine (*Power Unlimited*), and how does its constructions of the gamer include and exclude certain demographics – whether through gendered or racialized representations? Specifically, it bases itself on all advertisements, not just those for games, to investigate widely how the 'gamer' as an audience and a subculture was constructed in the local context of Dutch and Belgian audiences beyond standardized game advertisements for a global or 'Western' market.

In order to do so, our work takes as its basis the first 5 years (1993-1998) of one of the longest-existing still published game magazines, *Power Unlimited*, in order to analyze how its advertising constructs a gamer-audience in a vital period during which a growing new market for videogames came to exist, and before widespread access to the internet. It does so in three phases, firstly by giving a quantitative overview of advertised representations of who to identify with, what antagonists look like, and who are presented as 'other,' such as objects of rescue, motivation or aid (damsels or dudes in distress, side-kicks, and so on). Secondly, by qualitative analysis of specific advertisements that appeared, based on the quantitative overview, as typical for constructions of identity for Dutch-speaking gamer audiences in the 1990s: who should you identify as? Who should you fight? Who should you rescue or who is, otherwise, supposed to be in the margins? Thirdly, the data is compared to a global corpus, available within the wider HACS project.

IDENTIFY, ANTAGONIZE, OBJECTIFY

On the basis of concrete visual and discursive material throughout 5 crucial years of constructing a gamer audience, our analysis shows how gaming advertisements specifically identified hegemony, antagonized non-white people, and objectified non-men. A Dutch-speaking gamer audience is not just represented by, but also interpellated actively as white men through advertising (e.g., Figure 1). At the same time, advertisements serve to show wide-spread antagonization of non-white characters as dangerous or immoral 'bad guys;' and objectification of non-male characters as helpless or subservient (e.g,. Figure 2). As for Belgian and Dutch gamers in the 1990s, we found that despite the position of those countries in that time as politically progressive, their locally constructed gamer cultures reproduced and confirms globally occuring biases toward white people, while actively antagonizing non-white and non-male bodies.

On one hand, then, we theoretically conclude that such a parallel construction of what, 20 years later, has become a globally exclusionary and toxic gamer culture, is neither a global or a local (national) process. Instead, it appears that the construction of the gamer as male, white and heterosexist has taken place on a meso-level, that is: a handful of companies designed advertisements for what they thought was a target group, thereby creating an audience that did not formerly exist, through a visualized discourse signified primarily through three verbs: identifying hegemony, antagonizing non-whiteness, and objectifying non-men. Such a socio-semiotic approach suggests that the discursive systems constructed by advertisements act as "regimes of truth" on emerging social organizations (Foucault, 2014), in this case: communities of players being subjectivated into 'gamers.'

Methodologically, we argue that taking localized archives of, in this case, the first five years of a historically early, linguistically well-demarcated, and still-running game

magazine, is a productive way of identifying how hegemonic and identified identities have been framed and branded in cultural contexts outside of the anglosphere – whether in concurrence with or against ruling 'gamer' hegemony as studied over the past 20 years of game studies. Analysis of advertisements (quantitatively and qualitatively) shows that, first, advertisements are a prime site for tracing *who* is constructed as the intended target audience and who is consequently externalized as *not* a gamer. In other words: the process of framing the gamer.

FIGURES

Figure 1. "Yo, Cyberdude" interpellates the imagined reader of this advertisement as a male and furthermore English-speaking, computer-literature subject (November 1993).

Figure 2. An advertisement for a related product "not for girls & parents," showing on its cover "the ideal girl" with Mr. Bean glancing at Pamela Anderson. (September 1994).

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