Lad Mags and Anti-feminist Irony in the Formation of Gaming Cultures

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This exploratory research builds on existing archival work with gaming magazines that examines the construction of masculinity in game cultures by considering the role of gaming in British 'Lad Culture.' The paper focuses on how videogame advertising (and to an extent production) was impacted through integration into the promotional culture of 'Lad Mags.' The considerable irony that framed the sexualized role that women had in this new promotional culture served to further embed and normalize sexism and misogyny as expressions of masculinity in gaming cultures.

Previous work on the formation of British gaming culture has productively focused on the vibrant home computer and game-specific magazine scene (Kirkpatrick 2015). Cote (2020) conducted thematic analysis of several North American and one British gaming magazine in a larger project examining casual games and gender. Kocurek's (2015) work on masculinity and arcades in 1980s North America draws extensively from contemporary trade publications. This key work and others highlight the role that industry and hobbyist periodicals have played in shaping masculinity in gaming cultures.

This paper will build on this existing work on the role of magazines in the formation of masculinity in gaming culture by considering how gaming was incorporated into 'Lad culture' through its integration into the promotional cultures of the wave of new men's lifestyle magazines of the 1990s colloquially described as 'Lad Mags.' The magazines included such titles as *Loaded*, *FRONT*, *Maxim*, and others, and notably influenced the format and content of a range of contemporary men's magazines across the globe from *GQ* and *Esquire* to *Playboy*, *Details,* and others (Lambiase & Reichert 2006). The overwhelming success of the 'Lad mags' in the 1990s and early 2000s is considered part of 'cool Britannia,' a period where the influence of the British cultural industries was significant, which is also associated with 'Brit Pop,' The Spice Girls, Guy Ritchie, and others.

To establish the significance of these magazines in the formation of masculine identity in gaming cultures this paper will examine the relationship between British industry-leading Game Publisher Eidos Interactive—part of the technological arm of 'Cool Britannia'—and the 'Lad mags.' This relationship is demonstrated through a variety of archival materials: contemporary news sources, biographies of game designers and promotional workers, and promotional information. This paper will use these materials

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to discuss the release advertising and promotion of three games published by Eidos Interactive that were heavily promoted during 1997: *Deathtrap Dungeon* (Asylum Studios 1997), *Fighting Force* (Core Design 1997), and *Tomb Raider II* (Core Design 1997). These three games notably focused their promotions on the glamourous and sexualized presentation of their woman protagonists—Alana McKendricks, Lara Croft, Mace Daniels, and Red Lotus—in part through the employment of glamour models from 'Lad mags' to portray them at events in Europe and North America.

The integration of gaming into the promotional culture of 'Lad mags' raises crucial issues around irony and post-feminism in gaming cultures. Kirkpatrick (2015) has fruitfully demonstrated the significance of irony in British gaming magazines, in addition to this 'Lad mags' have notably employed irony both to destabilize masculine class identity and to express anti-feminist (and other reactionary) sentiments (Benwell 2016). The woman protagonists of the games discussed ostensibly embody the qualities of 1990s 'Girl Power' (Harris 2004), while simultaneously reducing femininity to a quality of the body (Deuber-Mankowsky 2005; Gill 2007). Taken together, these issues suggest how the adoption of the promotional cultures of the 'Lad mag' further embedded and normalized misogynistic and anti-feminist behaviors in game cultures.

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