

Chapter 4

The Games Men Play: How Students Use Video Games to Construct Masculinity

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ABSTRACT

This chapter conveys the results of a study examining how male students use video games to construct their masculinity. Applying a critical discourse methodology, the study provides insight into how men construct their masculinity within video game discourse communities and how the construction applies to other discourses. It examines how men enter the discourse, what they learn in the discourse, and then how they apply that learning to other discourse communities. It concludes with recommendations and suggestions regarding how video games are a critical part of popular culture that facilitates construction of an identity through the multitude of encounters and relationships within the discourse.

INTRODUCTION

There is a common misconception that video game players are overweight, social awkward individuals that reside in their parents basement either shunning human interaction or living as ticking human time-bombs waiting and planning to express their rage in angry outbursts of violence. Likewise, the misconception exists that video games not only encourage this behavior but stick men playing these games into a place where they eschew adult responsibilities and fail to reach their human potential. In either case, video games are a cause for the regression and stunting of men and masculinity development (Kimmel, 2008).

These assumptions and misconceptions are, of course, false. This study examines the traditional problems associated with video games and men to uncover if and how men are able to construct a masculine identity within these discourse communities. Given so many public misconceptions about video games and men, this study investigates the relationship to determine interactions and effects between the two.

Research about video games and media suggests these are rich and fecund sites of semiotics representation (Gee, 2004; Jenkins, 2008). What it does not explore, however, is how these video impact the development and constructions of masculinity. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate and

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inquire about how two-year college men construct their masculinity using referents and encounters from video game discourse communities. It situates itself at the intersection of semiotics, video games, and college men and masculinity to examine how each relate to and impact one other. Importantly, it seeks to understand how constructions of masculinity lead to the development of identity and leads to the challenging and resistance of hegemony.

What follows is a brief outline of significant concepts and research that comprise the background literature for this study. Next, there is a brief overview of the study's design and participant selection. This is followed by findings related to how the participants entered video game discourse communities, what they learned and internalized, and then how they applied that learning. Finally, it concludes with discussion and recommendations for further study.

UNDERSTANDING THE GAMES

Semiotics

Paul Cobley (2015) makes the assertion that there is a "sublime position growing out of the definition of the humanities as fostering harmony or standing against de-humanization" (p.210). While conventional wisdom and perceptions see technology as repressive and dehumanizing, taking a semiotic perspective can emphasize the individual person and the associated identity within the cacophony. Individuality, then, emerges from the conglomeration and configuration of signs, referents, and meaning produced through this interaction. The individual, then, is the acknowledgement of human agency: "human agency is the *Umwelt*; we are within the products of semiosis that make up the objects of the humanities" (Cobley, 2015, p. 217). From this position within the *umwelt*, individuals are able to interact and potential change the lifeworld and, thereby, control their own identity. The individual does not passively exist within this process of semiotic mediation; they actively interpret and internalize signs to create their own meaning.

This exchange of information is central to communication theory and communicative action. Habermas (1985) interrogated this process to warn about the colonization of the lifeworld, which he defined as those things on the peripheral of human awareness. Advertisements on the side of the road, for example, are part of the lifeworld because drivers recognize and read them. These drivers, however, may not be actively aware of this process; it is part of the background. So, Habermas believed that acts of hegemony and hegemonic control leech into the lifeworld to create subversive ideology that limits the replication of meanings until only one remains. Of course, this sole remaining hermeneutic supports the dominate ideology and maintains repressive power structures in society.

To this end, Habermas echoes Horkheimer and Adorno's (1999) critique of the Culture Industry. Culture is intentionally manipulated through these culture industries to control the sign-systems that produce meaning. Horkheimer and Adorno theorized that culture would become sites of hegemonic control where the definition of 'normal' would be created and replicated. Individuals existing within these culture industries would believe this definition to be natural and, thus, internalize and accept it. Their own identity, therefore, would blend into this ooze and any sense of individuality would be lost. As the lifeworld is colonized by these hegemonic culture industries, the sense of the individuality and the individual diminishes due to these hegemonic influences. They become automatons.

While theorists from the Frankfurt School wrote in opposition to culture industry, Walter Benjamin proposed an alternative point of view. In his seminal essay "Digital Art in the Age of Mechanical Re-

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