

## Chapter 6

# Levelling (Up) the Playing Field: How Feminist Gamers Self-Identify and Learn in Online Communities

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### ABSTRACT

*This ethnographic study explores how feminist video game players mobilise in online environments. The main research questions of this chapter involve identity and learning. How are identities formed in online feminist gaming communities, how much of one's identity is disclosed, what determines these choices in identity disclosure, and for what purpose? What kind of informal learning is promoted and produced in online feminist gaming communities, and how does this learning take place? After analysing posts, articles, comments, and interview responses from members of feminist gaming blog The Borderhouse, it was found that feminist gamers prefer identity disclosure to concealment. While identity disclosure can be traumatic for some feminist gamers in non-feminist online gaming communities, identity disclosure is encouraged in feminist gaming online forums, as it contributes to a member's credibility and garners trust from other members. The trust and credibility garnered affects the learning that takes place, as those who are trusted help influence the content and production of discussion. Furthermore, it was found that informal learning occurs with participants of the blog through regular informal feedback, networking, and the encouragement of critical thinking skills.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2012, media critic Anita Sarkeesian started a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds for her Web video series, “Tropes Vs. Women,” to bring feminist analyses of popular culture beyond the college classroom and into the mainstream (Sarkeesian, 2012). In particular, her goal was to explore the ways in which women are portrayed in video games and game culture. Although Sarkeesian was well aware of the misogyny present in the gaming industry and had had her share of harassment over the years, nothing could have prepared her for the intense backlash and harassment that ensued.

Sarkeesian’s Youtube and Wikipedia pages were attacked by coordinated groups of hackers who inundated her with violent and sexually charged messages, and her email inboxes were flooded with threats (Watercutter, 2012). The attacks were organised through online game forums and “included attempts to get [Sarkeesian’s] accounts banned, a torrent of hate on Youtube, plus countless threats of violence, death, sexual assault and rape” (Sarkeesian, 2012). Hackers went as far as creating a game called “Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian,” and the assailants publicly boasted about their “success” in silencing Sarkeesian (Pinchefsky, 2012; Sarkeesian, 2012). Threatened with rape, death threats, and Photoshopped pictures of herself being abused, Sarkeesian and her readership were made to feel powerless and vulnerable by the “trolls” that sought to intimidate her and other female gamers. And while the messages were indeed alarming, overwhelming support was shown from feminists and supporters alike who shared their outrage on social media outlets. In fact, Sarkeesian’s initial Kickstarter campaign for \$6,000 reached its goal within the first 24 hours, and soon skyrocketed to a whopping \$158,000 (Pinchefsky, 2012; Sherman, 2012), and continues to grow support among mainstream audiences, inspiring countless other gamers to speak out about discrimination in online gaming communities.

Sarkeesian’s experience mirrors the experience of many gamers, perhaps on a much larger (but not by any means less significant) scale. While feminist gamers have been mobilising and resisting discrimination for years, technology has certainly helped feminists coalesce and reach wider audiences. As a feminist gamer myself, I am continually reminded of the tropes that exist in mainstream media that work against me, and while I remain outraged and disappointed by the sexism prevalent within gaming culture, I still enjoy playing video games. Although it can sometimes be disheartening to see the same sexist (and one can easily add racist, ableist, heterosexist) ideas in video games and game culture, it is comforting to know that I am not alone. More and more feminist gamers are “coming out” and sharing their mutual love and disdain for gaming culture, and are doing so by using technology to network, mobilise, and interact.

Working within a feminist framework, in this ethnographic study, I will explore how feminist gamers are utilising Web 2.0 technologies to build their identities (online and in real life) and how they are using technology to generate and propagate knowledge.

The two major research questions the chapter will address are the following:

1. What role does identity play in online feminist gaming communities? How are participants expected to identify themselves to others? How do participants develop and propagate online identities using social media?
2. How does informal learning take place in online feminist gaming communities, and what kind(s) of learning is produced?

The first section of this chapter, Methodology, begins with a description of the feminist gaming blog under study and its participants. Then, descriptions are given regarding the research methods used in procuring and analysing data. The second

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