

How We Are (Not)Coping Under The New Gaming Public: An Existential-Materialist Approach to Feminist Games and Cultural Research

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INTRODUCTION

Using qualitative mixed-methods and gathering empirical data through fieldwork, surveys, and semi-structured interviews, this research reports on the lived-experiences of how people cope (or do not cope) with the increased normalisation of sexism, racism, and homophobia pervasive across the new gaming public. In this paper, I argue that ‘toxicity’ in games force people to be in constant negotiations with how they play (or do not play) games, what genres of games they play (or do not play), as well as how they *negotiate to navigate* across a multitude of relationships and spaces throughout their online, offline, political, personal, public, private, work and domestic spheres of living.

I borrow the term ‘the new gaming public’ from Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2012) to describe how popular gaming is tied to a particular hypermasculine gamer identity. The ‘new gaming public’ distinguishes a dominate culture against others which have always included more diverse participants. Thus, the new gaming public is characterised by the tensions between ‘who are’ and ‘who are not’ included in their communities. Over the past decade, writers have begun to replace the term ‘gamer’ with ‘players’ to represent a greater range of participants more accurately. However, despite these minor but still significant acts of reparation, a need remains to critique prevailing narratives. This research contributes to the growing feminist literature on the cultural tensions in the new gaming public and examines how those who do not fit the dominant gamer identity cope (or do not cope) with that hegemonic public.

In response to the new gaming public, feminist voices have frequently advocated for greater inclusivity across player communities, industries, journalism, and games academia. This advocacy work usually gets anchored onto discussions about representation. Accordingly, feminist critiques of sexist, racists, and homophobic depictions of in-game characters will often also seek to promote the ‘diversification’ of games industry workforces in order to achieve overall ‘greater representation’ from the ground up. While this work is crucial and should not be discounted, I contend that we must also diversify how we discuss social justice issues. To paraphrase Amanda

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A. Phillips (2020) and Clare Hemmings (2012): *We must provide different accounts of lived-experiences, but we must also learn how to tell these stories differently.* Therefore, I want to give a greater appreciation for a wider plethora of feminist approaches and outline another way to explore topics housed under the umbrella of ‘social justice and games.’

According to Adrienne Shaw (2011), when researchers too heavily rely on identity categories, those studies risk reifying their participants and can continue to hide the extent of a “player’s relationship to the medium,” (Ibid., p. 31). Instead of becoming constricted by identity categories, I introduce an attunement into affective resonances and dissonances of *(not)coping* in response to those potential limitations of identitarian-based research. I contend that the affective dimensions of *(not)coping* as a reflexive feminist approach is able to traverse different relationships across online, offline, public, private, work, and domestic spheres. This approach draws from an *existential-materialist* lens (cf. Massumi 2002; Stewart 2007) and merges competing theories of *affective labour* (cf. Hardt 1999; Gregg 2009) and *affective politics* (cf. Nash 2011; Hemmings 2012; Phillips 2020) to create a new investigative framework that generates new research questions for games and cultural researchers. When attending to invisible everyday struggles over power, *(not)coping* maps particular tensions that animate gaming cultures and their *affective networks* (Paasonen et al., 2015) as dynamic *forcefields* (Jackson 2012) embedded in everyday life.

Overall, this research explores an alternative approach to studying gaming culture in a manner that does not necessitate a focus on play, playing, or creating play. When pointing to the experiences of *(not)coping*, this research takes on a feminist instruction to include those who are not necessarily ‘gamers’ or ‘players’, but who all—nonetheless—have meaningful experiences in their (dis)connections to games. Consequently, this research observes various themes such as embodiment, consumption, attachment, relationship dynamics, mixed-feelings, self-care, affective labour, inevitability, burnout, frustration, or anger, that is then fused together with the qualitative data studying esports spectators, or people who play games in romantic relationships, or game developers, or diversity workers in game studies. This research offers critical approaches to discussing topics such as hypermasculinity, neoliberalism, nationalism, identity, drinking cultures, crunch time, advocacy work, games academia and beyond. Essentially, this research presents an overarching argument in favour of giving greater value to marginalised experiences, and how those stories are intersectional, significant, necessary, and meaningful to any and all discussions about gaming cultures.

BIO

Mahli-Ann Butt is a part-time doctoral candidate at the University of Sydney co-supervised by Dr Marcus Carter and Professor Catherine Driscoll in the Departments of Media & Communications and Gender & Cultural Studies. She holds an elected seat on the executive board of the Digital Games Research Association. Mahli-Ann was DiGRA’s inaugural Diversity Officer and continues to contribute to DiGRA’s Diversity Working Group. She was also the past Editor-in-Chief of the student game studies peer-reviewed bi-annual publication *Press Start Journal*. Her own co-authored publications ‘Feminist and Furious: Diversity Work(ers) Against Game Studies of Empire!’ (2020) and ‘Rebel Girls and Consequence in *Life Is Strange* and *The Walking Dead*’ (2017) have appeared in *Games and Culture*. She is a casual lecturer and tutor at the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales teaching across subjects on media, games, and cultural studies to both undergraduate and masters level students.

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