

Feminist Simulations: Deep in the Dream of a Game

By

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Abstract

This study delves into how the worlds of computer gaming and fine art intersect, employing DIY feminism to reflect on the gendered world of gaming and the links between simulation, reality, and fantasy within the game of Minecraft. I argue for a feminine craft (crochet) to challenge masculine gaming oppressions and the lack of representation, acceptance, and visibility for women in gaming culture. My research question is taken from the End Poem seen when the player has beaten the game's main boss. There is a line within the poem that asks, "But what true structure did this player create, in the reality behind the screen?" (End Poem, 2022). This is the question I have sought to answer within this study, by exploring a methodological approach that combines autoethnography and phenomenology to create a reflexive personal narrative.

Declaration of Originality

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for Masters of Fine Art at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at another university.

Date: 06/ 12/ 22

Sign:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. M. M.', written over a horizontal line.

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Epigraph

I see the player you mean.

PLAYERNAME?

Yes. Take care. It has reached a higher level now. It can read our thoughts.

That doesn't matter. It thinks we are part of the game.

I like this player. It played well. It did not give up.

It is reading our thoughts as though they were words on a screen.

That is how it chooses to imagine many things when it is deep in the dream of a game.

Words make a wonderful interface. Very flexible. And less terrifying than staring at the reality behind the screen.

They used to hear voices. Before players could read. Back in the days when those who did not play called the players witches, and warlocks. And players dreamed they flew through the air, on sticks powered by demons.

What did this player dream?

This player dreamed of sunlight and trees. Of fire and water. It dreamed it created. And it dreamed it destroyed. It dreamed it hunted and was hunted. It dreamed of shelter.

Hah, the original interface. A million years old, and it still works. But what true structure did this player create, in the reality behind the screen?

It worked, with a million others, to sculpt a true world in a fold of the [scrambled], and created a [scrambled], for [scrambled], in the [scrambled].

It cannot read that thought.

No. It has not yet achieved the highest level. That, it must achieve in the long dream of life, not the short dream of a game.

Does it know that we love it? That the universe is kind?

Sometimes, through the noise of its thoughts, it hears the universe, yes.

But there are times it is sad, in the long dream. It creates worlds that have no summer, and it shivers under a black sun, and it takes its sad creation for reality.

To cure it of sorrow would destroy it. The sorrow is part of its own private task. We cannot interfere.

Sometimes when they are deep in dreams, I want to tell them, they are building true worlds in reality. Sometimes I want to tell them of their importance to the universe. Sometimes, when they have not made a true connection in a while, I want to help them to speak the word they fear.

It reads our thoughts.

Sometimes I do not care. Sometimes I wish to tell them, this world you take for truth is merely [scrambled] and [scrambled], I wish to tell them that they are [scrambled] in the [scrambled]. They see so little of reality, in their long dream.

And yet they play the game.

But it would be so easy to tell them...

(End Poem, 2022)

Introduction

This study is born from my combined love for video gaming and contemporary art. While trying to decide what to make my master's exhibit about, I was torn between wanting to dedicate time to academic pursuits and playing video games. My original intention was to keep my art-making and game-playing separate. However, the further I progressed with my practical work, the less I could keep the world of video games and my experiences in them from seeping into my practice. This led me to an important realization: far from a hobby used for recreational purposes, video gaming became a part of who I am, shaping my identity and how I think of myself. Hence, my investigation into intersectional identities as I have proof that this phenomenon is real. As a feminist, I incorporate a sociocultural message into my work as I cannot simply focus on aesthetic admiration alone, the more I play games to spark inspiration for this project the more I interact with other players sharing the gaming space. As a woman, this is always an unpredictable activity. It became clear to me that this space I actively participate in was not one originally intended for someone of my identity and still had its issues in making me feel accepted as a female gamer. My observation is not a novel, but a sentiment shared by many of my fellow female-identifying gamers, an issue I feel necessary to incorporate into my work. The contemplation of these different aspects led me to my research question: How do we navigate a player's in-game experience with the player's lived experience behind the screen? Phrased differently and taken directly from the End Poem: *But what true structure did this player create, in the reality behind the screen?*

To investigate and answer this question, I had to read what other researchers had written on similar topics, as the nature of my study is an area that features a knowledge gap that I seek to address. There is very little research in this field and my literature review is a step towards knowledge production. Initially, I struggled with how to put my observations about my chosen topic into words or occasionally fully understand them until I read Yacine Kout (2019). In his paper *Breaking Down The Enchantment: A Critical Autoethnography of Video Gaming*, Kout (2019: 68) helped me understand that "writing is a process through which we make sense of our experiences, our world, and our position in it by bringing ideas to life on paper". After this realization, I was more confident in outlining the parameters of my study and working towards a fully realized mini-thesis. I was able to situate my practice within my current favourite game. That game is called Minecraft and is the context in which my study takes place.

With my practice, I dissect the different realms that make up the game Minecraft. These are the Overworld¹, the Nether², and the End³. I have documented my interactions and explorations within each of these realms. By recording my gameplay sessions, I show what types of mobs⁴ live in these spaces and what uses they have concerning resource gathering. My simulation of the game is based on the version of Minecraft which was released at the start of this study. It was the *Caves and Cliffs* update that featured new animal mobs such as axolotls and goats. It also featured a new algorithm for world generation that made exploring caves more exciting for the player. One of the new cave biomes included in this update was a biome called *Lush Caves* [Fig.1]. This biome is what I've modelled the main space of my installation after. The gallery space I have chosen to display my practical work in simulates a cave-like room that has three conjoining spaces in the corners of the room. I have made a map outlining the display layout of my exhibit [Fig.2]. As the viewer walks down into the room via the ramp entrance, they are confronted by the scenery of a lush cave complete with glowberry sculptures [Fig.3] hanging from the ceiling. They will have to walk around the main room and step into the adjoining rooms, each simulating a different Minecraft realm, the first being the Overworld. This space brings to life the Overworld by depicting sculpted passive mobs commonly found in this dimension within the game. I have crocheted Minecraft bees [Fig.4] and a pig [Fig.5] to show the gentle nature of this dimension during the daytime. In addition to these mob sculptures, I have placed flower sculptures [Fig.6] to simulate the Overworld environment. This space contains a TV screen that shows the viewer my interactions through my avatar. Within the Overworld, this mainly shows adventuring, farming, building, and resource gathering. As the viewer moves through the space, the next adjoining area they encounter is the room dedicated to my experiences in the Nether. To simulate this hell-like world, I have crocheted two hostile ghost-like [Fig.7] mobs, called Ghasts, commonly found in this dimension. I have also created two sculptures of my favourite mob found in the Nether; they are called Striders [Fig.8] and can be used to ride through the vast lava lakes abundant in this zone. To ride the striders, the player must have the right equipment: a saddle and a fishing rod

¹ The Overworld is the dimension in which all players begin their Minecraft world. Most players spend their time in this dimension. (Minecraft.fandom.com)

² The Nether is a dangerous hell-like dimension containing fire, lava, fungal vegetation, many hostile mobs, and exclusive structures and biomes. (Minecraft.fandom.com)

³ The End is a dark, space-like dimension consisting of separate islands in the void made out of end stone. It is inhabited by Endermen and Shulkers. The Ender dragon (game's main boss mob) also spawns when the player first arrives. (Minecraft.fandom.com)

⁴ A Mob is Minecraft jargon for an "AI-driven entity resembling a living creature". (Minecraft Wiki 2022).

with a warped fungus on the end; these requirements form a part of the delightful game mechanics Minecraft is famous for and is part of the reason why the game is so dear to me. I also include a wool lava fall to depict the dangerous environment of this realm. The TV screen in this area depicts my interaction with a structure that is unique to this biome. It is called a fortress and is detrimental to gameplay as you need to kill Blazes [Fig.9] for blaze rods [Fig.10], which acts as brewing stand fuel, an important ingredient for crafting potions. They can also be made into *eyes of ender* [Fig.11] that, when thrown into the air in the Overworld, lead the player to a stronghold that houses the portal to the End dimension. The third area within my exhibition depicts the End dimension which is home to Endermen and the infamous Ender Dragon which is the main boss mob of the game. This space houses an almost life-size Enderman [Fig.12] performing an action they are famous for within the game, stealing random blocks from the overworld. There is also a TV screen in this space depicting my fight with the Ender Dragon, the final step before reaching the End Poem.

As an artist, I work tactilely with my hands. I have chosen to not only rely on the manipulation of the digital blocks on screen using a computer keyboard, mouse, and game mechanics to reach my intended vision inside my virtual world. I also have recreated Minecraft imagery using literal crafting techniques such as crochet in the real world. In some respects, crochet approximates the crude graphics of the game, as Minecraft is not coded to resemble hyperreal imagery. My process signals a critical inversion, from the immaterial to materiality, from 'Minecraft' to 'My Craft'. This study investigates how the video game world of Minecraft can be taken from a computer screen and reconstructed and positioned as an interactive art installation. Using various crafting techniques, my creative practice replicates the fantasy environments of Minecraft, bringing these elements out of the screen and into real life. In the process, I critically employ the strategy of DIY Feminism to reflect on the gendered world of gaming. I argue for using a feminine craft (crochet) to replicate a masculine activity (gaming) to challenge masculine gaming oppressions and the lack of representation, acceptance and visibility for women in gaming culture. The playing of the game Minecraft is as much a part of my creative strategy as the production of an art object is. Within my game world, I use the blocks I have sourced, farmed, and mined to sculpt my vision of a perfect digital world. I produce structures and build on aesthetic landscapes as I progress through the game. The outcome of this study is an installation that consists of a simulated fantasy world that houses crochet structures, a glimpse of my fully developed and explorable virtual world and video evidence of this process.

I use my own lived experiences to conduct this research, working from an intersectional identity; being an artist, a gamer, a woman, an academic, and a feminist. Within this thesis, I use the links between simulation, reality, and fantasy to document and theorise my experiences with the game Minecraft. My study is situated within artistic practice, which operates as a form of qualitative research. As Gray and Malins (1993:6) explain, it “promotes the value of subjectivity, individuality, complex interaction and involvement”. I would not classify my research as belonging to any one methodological approach, as I borrow and take what suits my needs as a researcher from more than one approach. For example, I reappropriate the autoethnographic approach, “Auto refers to the self. Ethno refers to the culture. Graphy refers to writing” (Kout 2019: 62). As Kout describes it, “autoethnography refers to the writing of the self in relation to a specific cultural context”. My research embodies this description as I write about myself within my research in relation to the cultural context of contemporary art and gamer culture and the discourses they entail. I also borrow from phenomenology as a research method as I use a personal narrative through which I “view myself as the phenomenon” (Ellis 2004). Ellis (2004) describes this process as researchers writing “evocative stories specifically focussed on their academic as well as their personal lives”. I have written about and recorded video evidence of my gaming sessions that act as field notes I later reflect on. I use phenomenology predominantly in Chapter 3 as I describe the sensory experiences I have when sculpting my work. In addition to this, I have compiled what I describe as a ‘Craft Tome’ [Fig.14 & 15] that documents my practical experimentation with the making and immersion of a fantasy game world made real. Found within this Tome are examples of experimentation such as craft composites that depict an impressionistic iteration of Minecraft imagery. [Fig.11, 12 & 13].

I take a subjective approach to my work as it is the result of documenting my findings, experiences, and labour that has ultimately culminated into an interactive art installation and accompanying mini-thesis. I am reflexive in the analysis of my findings as they are the direct result of complex interaction and personal involvement and are based on my lived experiences while playing the game and producing practical work, “the capacity to question one’s experiences and translate a process through which personal stories are reflected through and upon to validate them” (Kout 2019: 65). My goal in combining these different methodologies is to form my own form of praxis through the investigation of my research question. I view the concept of *praxis* in the same way Paulo Freire (1970: 126) does, as described by Kout (2019:

55): “He defines praxis as reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it”. Through my investigation and analysis of my study, I reflect on the discourses contained within my study and theorise what actions I take to resist specific systems of oppression I encounter as a female gamer and artist. Richardson (2003: 530) describes this process as “putting yourself into your text and putting your text into the literatures and traditions of social sciences”.

My methodology also uses textual analysis and visual analysis. The former involves the reading of essays in journals, books, and related sources. This helps me to articulate my project through a specific lens within the confines of my context. The latter concerns images, games, and videos that are pertinent to my research project. *My Craft: Building True Worlds In Reality* is the name of my exhibition. This analysis then links to and informs my creative strategy: using Minecraft imagery to fabricate ‘My Craft’ by taking elements of what is seen in the game and simulating my version of this. This links to the name of my installation which is a play on the name Minecraft and the medium I use to create it. The second half of my installation title is taken from the End Poem which was a major contributing factor to the inspiration of this project and one of my main goals in playing the game. I use literature on feminism, intersectionality, gaming, and simulation to better understand my positionality within my research and to work towards the goal of answering my research question.

My thesis is divided into three chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of my study that, when put together, helps answer my research question. *Chapter 1: Minecraft and the Gendered World of Gaming* discusses my reality while playing Minecraft, gaming as a gendered space, theorising my simulation of Minecraft, fantasy in Minecraft and how it pertains to the practical elements of my study. It entails how I engage with the game, what I believe a gendered space to be and how I go about navigating it as a female gamer, including first-hand accounts of me playing games in the form of creative writing appendices. It also places my simulation of Minecraft imagery in context, regarding the theory of simulation and explains why fantasy plays a large part in creating this installation. *Chapter 2: DIY Feminism, Intersectionality and Crochet as Women's Work* explains how I go about defining what DIY Feminism is to me and how I use it with my study, how this process involves the reading and dissecting other feminisms, how it is closely linked to the theorising of intersectionality as a critical research approach and how these two concepts help me locate the art of crochet in another gendered space including my analysis of other artists. In *Chapter 3: My Own Work as a Response to the Gendered World of Gaming Using DIY Feminism as a Strategy*, I dissect this strategy into three

different approaches and show how they link to my literature review and what practical elements this results in. I then elaborate on how all these strategies result in the formation of my final installation.

Chapter 1: Minecraft And The Gendered World Of Gaming

This chapter details my experiences playing the game Minecraft as a form of practical engagement in the process of creating my master's exhibition. It explains in greater detail what the game Minecraft is about, how it's played, and how I, as a gamer, choose to engage with it. This chapter is divided into subsections for better clarity and to improve my articulation of the different elements and discoursing of themes. The first subheading is *My Reality While Playing Minecraft*, which documents my reality within the game and behind the screen. It is a summary of my field notes while playing the game to reach the End Poem. The second subheading is *Gaming As A Gendered Space* which explains what I mean by this phrase, why I consider gaming a gendered space and how I navigate it as a female-identifying gamer. This subsection contains reflections and observations I have made using creative writing to document my findings after physically inhabiting the space by playing and interacting with games. The third subheading is *Theorising My Simulation Of Minecraft*. It details why I, as an artist, have chosen to do this as a practical approach and places this theme in relation to the literature I have studied about this process. The fourth subheading, *Fantasy In Minecraft*, elaborates on my ideas around fantasy and speaks to the reason I want to simulate a digital fantasy environment as my final master's exhibition. It also helps towards answering my research question: But what true structure did this player create, in the reality behind the screen? (End Poem 2022).

Mojang studios is the company that invented and released the game Minecraft, described by them as, “designed as a three-dimensional, procedurally generated, pixel-like world with grasslands, mountains, trees, rivers and animals made with blocks and bricks of different compounds” (Mojang 2019). Minecraft is a game that relies on the deconstruction and reconstruction of elemental blocks. The player must find resources and fabricate structures that aid in survival. As Hart (2021: 46) in her paper, *Learning through Minecraft: A Phenomenological Study of Game-Based Instruction in Higher Education*, clarifies:

The objective in Minecraft is to break apart and place blocks that are made of various elements such as stone, glass, and wood to create structures such as homes, buildings, tunnels, transportation systems, and even cities in a real-like virtual world.

Minecraft has two different game modes, survival and creative. I choose to play Minecraft predominantly in survival mode [Fig.15], which has different difficulty settings; peaceful, easy,

normal and hard. For this study, I play in the normal setting, where the principal goal is to craft structures, objects, and items that will help players survive when confronted with challenges. Niemeyer & Gerber (2015: 217) in their paper, *Maker culture and Minecraft: Implications for the future of learning*, explain: “Survival mode is accomplished by mining for the appropriate resources and surviving attacks by hostile creatures”. These creatures are known as mobs.

The action of *playing* forms a large aspect of this study and without it, I would not have been able to do this research. I find it ironic that the first action I had to take to start this academic study was not something overly scientific; it was the simple act of playing the game that led me down the long road of gender inequality in gaming culture. “Play theorists too assert that gender socialization shapes play practices” (Shaw 2012: 35). By playing games, I was faced with a truth I had known for a while but had not yet critically engaged with as a scholar. The truth is that video game culture largely consists of inequalities when it comes to female gamers and how we are perceived and expected to exist in a space which does not accommodate us, women. In *Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality and gamer identity*, Shaw (2012: 35) explains:

The way researchers and marketers discuss gender differences in gaming often promotes the traditional correlations between masculinity and technology, and the converse disassociation of femininity and technology.

My Reality While Playing Minecraft

Gaming does not exist in a vacuum, videogames cannot be understood as geographical spaces, to be fully understood they must be studied as cultural spaces.

Kout 2019: 14

In this section, I analyse my own experiences with “the reality behind the screen”. This was achieved by taking field notes of the time I spent playing the game Minecraft as a form of data collection. “The scope of the field of study reaches beyond the pixels on screen” (Kout 2019: 73). Playing games forms a part of my methodology for this research, as it is not only an important tool for developing my practice but also helps me further realise how gaming is shaping me as an artist and a researcher, “these spaces are intertwined; they inform and influence each other” (Kout 2019: 16). For the portion of my study where I spent time in my solo survival Minecraft world, I recorded how many days it took me to reach the End Poem. The days were non-consecutive, but I have labelled the day I played, how many Minecraft days that equated to, and how many hours it took me in real time. I also marked any significant points of progress that occurred on these days and if I recorded gameplay footage that day. I compiled all this information in the table below:

<u>Game Play Day</u>	<u>Minecraft Days Played</u>	<u>Time Played</u>	<u>Recorded Gameplay?</u>	<u>Milestones</u>
1	11	2hrs 35 mins	Yes	
2	19	6hrs 20 mins	Partially	
3	18	6hrs	No	Six Deaths
4	21	7hrs	No	Railroad to village built (1000 blocks in distance)
5	18	6hrs	Partially	
6	13	4hrs 17mins	Yes	
7	15	5hrs	No	

8	12	4hrs	Partially	One Death. Nether Exploration/ Fortress Raid. Red Stone farm built. Villager Trading Hall.
9	4,5	1hr 30mins	Yes	
10	15	5hrs	Yes	Ender Dragon Fight, End Poem Reached
Total: 10 Days	146,5 MCD	47hrs 7mins		

A table summarising my gameplay field notes.

This process is one that I took my time engaging with to fully immerse myself in the digital world of Minecraft. I knew that this would be time-consuming as I deliberately did not attempt to speedrun⁵ the game to reach my goal faster. I played the game like I would if I were doing it for enjoyment. I contemplated the designs I created within the world, spent hours mining the correct aesthetic blocks for the builds I had in mind and enjoyed the thrill that came with leisurely exploring a newly generated game seed⁶. Before deciding to let myself enjoy the *play* portion of my study, however, I struggled with what this meant for my creative productivity. I felt that by investing this time in video gaming I was taking it away from art-making. This is something I often had trouble accepting because although it was easy for me to sit and play a game for hours on end, I eventually feel guilty doing this as I feel I should be dedicating this time to something more productive. I worried that by fully immersing myself in the game, I would not have the time to create impressive sculptures to fill my installation. This internal struggle is one of the reasons it took me so long to fully dedicate myself to engaging with Minecraft. Once I decided to include my gameplay as a part of my study and practical work, I felt as if the sphere of research opened and finally became an enticing endeavour rather than something I had to do to get my qualification.

One of the aspects of gaming that I noticed first through my method of playing the game was how physically isolating this action can be. I was playing in a solo world with my own set goals, so I did not have other people to help me reach them faster. I could not interact with

⁵ Speedrunning is a style of gameplay where players try to complete a game as quickly as possible. (www.sportskeeda.com/minecraft 2022).

⁶Minecraft world seeds are characters entered into the world seed box within the games main menu. Each string of characters is known as a ‘number’ that when entered will be converted by the game and automatically generate a unique world. (Minecraft Wiki 2022).

other players in my world because they simply didn't exist. If I wanted to achieve my goal of defeating the dragon and reaching the End Poem, I had to sit and play the game, by myself, for however many hours it took. This process involved isolating myself from the outside world. Kout (2019: 88) explains this process:

Most video games I play require dedicated attention, some for periods of time that go beyond an hour. Being able to engage in these activities meaningfully demands that I ignore my surroundings.

I employ a similar approach which requires fully immersing myself in the game through isolation leading to fewer interactions with real people. While I did enjoy the time, I spent playing Minecraft as a research methodology for this study, playing a game by myself in a world devoid of other players would not give me access to the true nature of the gaming culture I problematise. It was for this reason that I had to take my experiences in gaming to public spaces if I was going to fairly assess what it's like to be a female gamer today. This meant playing games online and investigating what it means to identify gaming as a gendered space.

Gaming As A Gendered Space

Gaming as a gendered space can be difficult to navigate if your gender forms the minority. Unfortunately, it is still depicted as a predominately male space, which can cause problems for female gamers who must go against prejudices while trying to exist within it. As described by Richard (2016: 72): “Digital gaming and the physical and virtual spaces formed around its play and engagement have long been viewed as male-dominated and marginalizing, especially for women and girls”. It is a space that allows its members to exist and participate without the presence of a physical body. While this opens many avenues for creative self-expression, with that comes a dangerous precipice that makes policing people in the space difficult, allowing for the abuse of other people to become trivial and frequent. This had me asking: How am I affected by operating in an oppressive space? What contribution does this have to my work? Considering that not everyone you encounter within the space is accepting of the different identities that exist within the gaming community. Kout (2019: 14) explains:

A set of video game players have embraced sexism and white supremacy. This vocal group claims video gaming as their sole property and oppresses any other individual or group that claims belonging to the video game community.

Within this study, I highlight how it can be difficult for female-identifying gamers to exist within the space based on the experiences of other female gamers and my own. An aspect of the gaming community I particularly take issue with is the sexism faced by female gamers, a problem noted by Kout (2019: 148): “Sexism is rampant in video gaming culture”. Attributed to this, is the unbalanced depictions of men and women characters in games partially because, according to Kout (2019: 150), most games, “Depict women as sexual objects or damsels in distress and men as brutal warriors guided by fame or lust”. The reason I find it imperative to understand how the negative aspects of this space affect me as a female gamer is that gaming has become a part of my identity,

Identification recognizes that people work within contexts in which particular identities are articulated and that inhabiting certain identity categories can shift one's relationship with another category (e.g. being both a woman and a gamer). (Shaw 2021: 30)

Understanding the prejudice I face within this space is an important first step into not only decoding them but also knowing how to go about negating them and remedying this issue.

Shaw (2012: 29) describes it best: “although problematic and difficult to be a part of it is important to understand me and how I fit into this space and why I need to feel a part of it”. Understanding my objectification and why I take issue with it is “the first sign of criticality” (Kout 2019: 40). This gender divide is evident in the games I play and in the Minecraft-based content on YouTube that I consume. A popular group of content creators I watch call themselves ‘Hermits’ and play on a server they have labelled Hermitcraft. (Hermitcraft.com 2022). It consists of 26 popular YouTubers and has been in operation for ten years. These creators get together and build, adventure, and create content in vanilla⁷ Minecraft survival mode. Although I enjoy the content many of the Hermits create, it concerns me that, among the 26 creators, only 5 of them identify as women.

Similar demographics of the game were observed by Anderson et al. (2017: 8) about the Minecraft community:

Most of the YouTube stars at *Minefaire* were both White and male (20 of 27). The two non-White stars were an Asian female and an Asian male, and there were five White female stars. Again this did not reflect the wider audience of the convention, which was seemingly racially diverse and over one-third female.

To me, it is a matter of visibility and representation that leads to the stigma of male domination in the gaming sphere. Bryce and Rutter (2005: 10) hypothesise: “that the invisibility of female gaming is a product of the general gender dynamics of public gaming, rather than a verifiable lack of interest by females in computer games”.

About this point and in addition to my Minecraft data collection, I documented the different experiences I had as a female-identifying gamer playing games throughout this study. When I wasn’t spending my time playing Minecraft or crocheting, I still wanted to engage with gaming culture because my interest in belonging to this community was paramount to understanding why I was doing this research. To do this, I felt I had to try to understand as many different aspects of it as possible. Whether playing Minecraft for this study or a different game as a form of stress relief and fun, these experiences were collected as creative writing appendices. Below

⁷ Vanilla refers to the original version of the game, one that is not modded. A mod is a fan-created version of the game one can install on top of the original game to improve or advance gameplay in a specific way e.g. adding new modifications or items that change the way the original game is played. (Minecraft Wiki 2022)

I detail my experiences and include some of my creative writing. This process was also integral in digging into the core reason for this study and helps to unpack why it is that female-identifying gamers are treated differently.

One night in 2022, I was encouraged to investigate a sphere of gaming I was not proficient at after my partner mentioned, in his opinion, how the game he was playing would be too difficult for me to play. The following excerpt is from Appendix B:

After he is done with the game, I ask him what it was about and if he thought I would enjoy it. He shrugs nonchalantly, “Maybe, but it’s very difficult. Not many girls enjoy it.”

He was describing the lawless wasteland of FPS’s ⁸ and in-game voice chat. On reflection, I realised that he was talking from the perspective of someone who plays these types of games often and has not frequently encountered many female players. However, at the time, I interpreted this comment as a negative descriptor of the game as being only open to men. Being who I am, I took this as an opportunity to challenge this stereotype and prove that women gamers could play any game that men could play. I was going to show him and the other men online that I was not intimidated by a masculine game. The following excerpt is from Appendix C:

I’m still not 100% sure if these are AI players or the real deal, like me, sitting behind a computer screen sweating with nervous unsurety.
Then I hear something I did not expect and it terrifies me. Afrikaans.
“Boyfriend!” I yell in panic. “What’s happening?”
“Who are they?”
“Why can I hear them?”
“Can they hear me?”
My Boyfriend laughs as he lifts my headphones off my head to listen.
“Those are the guys on your team, talking to each other using the in-game chat feature.” He calmly explains.
“They shouldn’t be able to hear you unless, you enable chat.” He continues to explain as he fiddles around with the settings of the game, looking for something specific.
“No look here, you have it on push-to-talk.” He gestures to the setting on the screen.
“They can only hear you if you push this button on your mouse.” More gesturing towards the specific button.
Oh! Okay Tayla, you are ok, pull yourself together woman!
The scariest part of the game hasn’t even started yet.

While playing the game we eventually referred to as *Warzone*, I quickly noticed that I was uncomfortable with letting my voice be heard with the in-game chat feature. This game had indeed turned out to be overwhelmingly male and volunteering my voice for game strategy discussions, or a feisty quip was a gamble at the best of times. Many female gamers struggle with this aspect of gaming, as Richard (2019: 75) explains: “Studies have found that, despite skill, a female voice is three times as likely to be harassed than a males”. Some players would hear my voice and interpret it as an invitation for harassment. This gendered factor, combined with my Gamertag⁹, led to many unpleasant experiences based solely on the fact that I identify and present as female. The following excerpt is taken from Appendix E:

I guess at some stage my boyfriend couldn't hear me over his headphones and I relayed some important information to him over the in-game chat channel. My first mistake. “Ooh! Which one of you is the girl?” asked the obnoxious teammate. I just stayed quiet as he was clearly trying to bait me. “I'm guessing its FizzyElf, that has to be a girls name.” He continued. “Heeeey girly I'm talking to you!” He sang over the mic. “I'm a woman actually.” I couldn't help but respond. My second mistake. “Do you even know how to play this game?” He asked smugly.

It was experiences like these that made my presence in this space feel forced and unwelcome. I was trying to exist in a space that singled out my gender as something to be objectified. “Harassment was a prevalent form of gatekeeping for women and ethnic/racial minorities. Such that the way they spoke was used to distinguish their gender or race/ethnicity” (Richard 2019: 77). On reflection, I could see how this objectification formed one of the main reasons for this game not being frequented by many women. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that more women played the game than I initially assumed. It inspired me how my fellow female gamers did not let the toxic¹⁰ male gamers encountered deter them from openly using the in-game chat to instruct on gameplay strategies and enjoy themselves. Sometimes, even openly advertising their gender with customised female avatars as opposed to the generic few I was able to choose from in the free-to-play character list. I also had my gripes with this factor

⁹ A Gamertag is your gaming alter ego. It is an alias, an optional avatar or a picture (gamerpic). (Microsoft.com). This can be a name you choose or you can go with randomized suggestions on the Battlenet application, the latter being what I went with.

¹⁰ A toxic gamer is a player who has a bad attitude in an online gaming context and will frequently try to put other players down and ruin their gaming experience. (getkidas.com).

because I, as the player, was only able to choose from two heavily stigmatised female avatars versus the four unique male avatars available.

Despite sometimes feeling uncomfortable, not all experiences with being singled out by my voice were negative. However, often it caused some sort of reaction. I found my favourite types of games were ones where I could speak freely or when I felt a deep sense of vindication at the fact that I got a higher kill count than the male gamer that was busy performing his masculinity in direct conflict with me simply because I was a ‘girl’. Shaw (2012: 35) elaborates: “when I’m playing a guy. I get fully absorbed because I really have to win. Because he just expects me to lose anyway because I’m a girl”. These experiences have helped me not only to become a better gamer but to form more resilience than some of the male players I have encountered. At first, it was shocking and emotional for me to be singled out and harassed, and I still have experiences that are frustrating enough to cause me to quit the match entirely. However, for the most part, I use those experiences to my advantage by letting myself get fired up by the naysayers. Such an attitude helps improve my performance as I let my adrenaline and competitiveness take over. In these *Warzone* experiences, I hypothesise that the lack of a physical presence gives toxic players a false sense of security that allows them to misbehave as they believe there are no consequences for their actions. As Cross (2016: 26) documents:

When internet users fail to apprehend one another as persons or to accept the reality of their virtual environment, it makes it all the easier for an anti-social behaviour to take hold and easier to suspend any ethical constraints on that behaviour. “It’s just a game” takes on a sinister meaning when looked at in this light, but matters get more complicated.

This gendered space and my findings in them not only contribute to the importance of my study into the lack of visibility and representation of female-identifying gamers but also constitute the reason I use a practical feminist strategy in my simulation of a digital world made real. This simulation of a digital world made real is elaborated on in the following subsection.

Theorising My Simulation Of Minecraft

Minecraft is categorized as an Open World game. In describing these types of games, Bonner (2018: 3) writes, “Open World computer games simulate a coherent and unmanageable vastness and evoke an exploratory spirit.” I engage the Open World format of the game within my practice, as this confronts the gamer with a fantasy environment seemingly inspired by the real world. My process is to take these already simulated images and re-simulate them in my design, thus questioning how simulations perpetuate themselves and how digital imagery duplicates itself online. Explaining this point, Westecott et al. (2013: 15) write, “the internet works through making copies; things make other things”. This is particularly pertinent in the world of gaming, where immersion in the game tends to blur the lines between fantasy and reality.

Using simulation, I investigate the intersection of video games and fine art. For my practice, it stands as an *operative mode* in a sense explained by Jean Baudrillard (1981: 366): “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself”. To me, it is the replication of the imagery seen within the game, operationally imitating what I see in a sculptural way. Djikie and Oatly (2017: 161) clarify, “We use simulations to understand complexes in which several factors interact”. I use simulation to better my understanding of my goal within my practice, also considering the question: “But what true structure did this player create, in the reality behind the screen?” (End Poem 2022). Where Baudrillard performs simulation through writing, I perform simulation by reproducing imagery from a game that is already a replication of real life. The “real life” is the original object being simulated within the game.

Simulation can be construed in many ways and yet it is difficult to separate the term from the French writer who originally theorised it. However, I would like to take a more modern approach and consider technology theorists such as Baudrillard did not have access to it at the time he contemplated the term. To achieve this, I have engaged with a book called *The Simulation Hypothesis* (2019) by MIT computer scientist Rizwan Virk. Virk draws from research and concepts from computer science, artificial intelligence, video games and quantum physics. He also references both speculative fiction and ancient eastern spiritual texts to show how all of these traditions come together to suggest the idea that we may be living inside a simulated reality like *The Matrix* (Warner Bros. Pictures 1999). It proves a fascinating read

that uses video game mechanics and popular sci-fi movie tropes to explain what it would take for us, as a civilisation, to achieve a *Matrix*-like level of simulation. It hypothesises; if we were to achieve this level of simulation, we would not be the first in the universe to do so.

Although not entirely on brand with the goal of my thesis or how I choose to use simulation within my practice, I found Virk's ideas helpful in putting some of my ideas into perspective. I am also partial to his explanations of various types of simulations found within video games, yet his book is beneficial as a part of my literature review. One of the ideas touched on in his book is the idea of a 'persistent world'. Virk explains (2019: 50), "this is defined as a world (virtual) that changes based upon what players do, this information is stored on the server" and "there could be multiple versions of the world hosted on different servers, each with different states". This is how objects remain in a virtual world like Minecraft after a player has logged out of the world. "This persistence is an illusion; it lasts only as long as the world's data on the server is saved and doesn't change" (Virk 2019: 45). I find his perspective about a persistent virtual world¹¹ interesting and extended it to the idea of an exhibition on display. The world I create for this exhibition manifests into being and exists only if it is on display. Like a virtual game world saved onto a server, the illusion of permanence of this rendered part of my life will disappear once the exhibition is over and the work has been taken down. The work technically still exists even though it will no longer be an accessible space into which the audience can step. Looking at my practice this way brings interesting interactions with the concept of simulation. The sculpted space I create is a very real place, one that exists beyond the boundaries of the screen where its source image is found. Through my use of sculpture, craft and DIY Feminism as a strategy, I take a small part of my virtual world that only I have access to and expand it into a physical environment that I am allowing others to step into. I have created this structure outside of my computer screen as a way of not only investigating the discourses I encounter in gaming culture but also as a result of answering my research question. My interaction with the simulation of the game Minecraft brings to life my version of a digital *fantasy* world, another theme that has affected the way the practical component of my master's work developed and came together and is elaborated on in the following subsection.

¹¹ A novel that is prevalent to my research and elaborates on the concept of cyberspace / virtual reality is *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline (2020).

Fantasy In Minecraft

My idea of a fantasy game space brought into the real space takes shape in the form of an interactive art installation. I create the opportunity for people to step into my physical reality beyond the screen by simulating my version of a fantasy world, bringing gaming into the sphere of real life. Here in the real, anyone can experience it even if they have no prior gaming knowledge. They will be able to see how I have dissected Minecraft into its three worlds and, through the gameplay videos placed in each section, see how I have traversed these realms.

My attraction to video games is similar to my attraction to art. They both started with the aesthetic before developing into something deeper. I was drawn to video games by the bright colours and fun sounds. The sense of accomplishment I would get when I get a new high score or finally beat a level I had been trying to reach made me stay. Video games bring out my competitive side while simultaneously allowing me to escape from academic life as a university student, “Players who engage in self-suppression play to escape their life difficulties and realities” (Kout 2019: 112). Even if I had no one else to play with, I could constantly compete with myself, improving the type of player I was. Minecraft introduced me to a world of vast landscapes that I could explore almost endlessly, and the aspect of resource collection was the reason I continued to do so. I was determined in my first world to collect as many different resources as possible with the goal of creating interesting and unique builds. How I transform the world around me makes me feel powerful. In my mind, it is always about the next build or the next project. How could I improve my building skills or build something even better than what I have done previously?

Consuming Minecraft content on YouTube is a part of the process I use to better my world-building skills. Seeing how professional Minecrafters can come up with unique building ideas is inspirational. I can use this virtual world as an escape and as a way of training my brain to think outside the box. When I play games where you can choose your avatar’s race, I am transfixed by the lore surrounding the race of my chosen character. For example, I want to know more about the plight of the Night Elves on WOW (World of Warcraft), a fantasy knowledge that helps to develop and grow my connection to my character. My interest in fictional game stories went further than just engaging my character on screen. I started sketching my characters. The more I drew, the more absorbed in gaming I became. I eventually started drawing my iteration of fantasy characters. I made backstories and whole lives for them

in my mind. It was so appealing to be able to step away from who I am physically and become something else in a different world. I learned about myself while doing this, building on my sense of identity, “video gaming as enchantment provided me with a space to build my identity, it gave me powerful moments that helped me find myself” (Kout 2019: 155).

I am inspired to replicate this feeling of awe in fantasy spaces. I want to use my passion for fantasy exploration in my art and create something that speaks to the virtual space by bringing it out of the screen into the bounds of a tangible reality. This undertaking was the challenge I issued myself for the duration of my master’s project. Would I be able to breathe life into this imagined space that was not yet real? A unique attribute of a space such as this is that people can engage with fantasy spaces in different ways, often blurring the lines of what is considered real. Some gamers form special attachments to the spaces they settle their characters in because it is a space to which they feel they belong. This sense of belonging can be tested in multiplayer games such as Rust (Facepunch Studios Ltd 2009), where survival, violence, and raiding other player’s bases are common aspects of the way the game is played,

We create and guard “territories” online that we implicitly treat as real, but in their defence, we may engage in actions that are only ethically credible because we act as if the perceived invaders are not actual people, just pixels. Real when it is convenient, unreal when it is not. (Cross 2016: 26)

I use video gaming as a form of escapism and catharsis, much like the process of making art. That is to say, “one aspect of my playing video games is to unwind, I play to have fun and entertain myself at the end of the day” (Kout 2019: 112). Regardless of the way I choose to play, many gamers can be seen in a negative light as the escape we allow ourselves and the mechanics that drive them can form a sort of addictive process. This is because it’s almost too wonderful to be a mythical being transforming the world around you, where in reality, you have very little power to create something as big and wonderful as the scale of the builds achievable in Minecraft. If I am critical of gaming culture, it is because it carries a negative stigma. Onlookers might perceive what is essentially staring at a screen for long periods as an unhealthy habit or even label it an addiction. As Kout (2019: 112) elaborates: “while my stories of escapism are rather soft, other players have engaged with gaming in ways that have been labelled as signs of addiction”.

This chapter explained the type of game Minecraft is, how I chose to play it, and how it affected my reality both in-game and from the perspective of the person behind the screen. In addition, this chapter also detailed my investigation into why I label gaming as a gendered space and how I, as a female-identifying gamer, navigate it and discourse it. I elaborate on how the first three subsections have influenced my art-making process and led me to choose to simulate my recreation of a Minecraft world in a fine art context and how my perception of fantasy aids this process. In chapter 2, I delve into *DIY Feminism* and how it links to my theorising of *Intersectionality*. I also contemplate the idea of *Crochet As Women's Work* and how the investigation into these themes aids my argument and the production of a final product.

Chapter 2: DIY Feminism, Intersectionality, And Crochet As Women's Work.

Feminism is a political philosophy that aspires to give women equal rights to men in all aspects of life.

Kaur and Sativa 2021: 4970

This definition of feminism is broad and does not consider the specific areas to which my work speaks. I have chosen to use the moniker *DIY Feminism*, discussed in the first subsection of this chapter, to describe my work and what I try to achieve by engaging in gaming culture. I engage and define DIY Feminism as it pertains to me and my project with specific links to the second subsection, *Intersectionality*, which is a theory that compliments my contemplation. Gray (2016: 68) elaborates: “intersectional feminists highlight interconnected identities, interconnected social forces, and distinct circumstances to theorise better women existing and operating within internet technologies.” These first two subsections then help me articulate why I locate and problematise the craft of crochet in the category of women’s work. In the third subsection, *Crochet As Women's Work*, I then extend this concept by engaging with an artist who has integrated these elements into her work and how it relates to my own.

In this chapter, I pay attention to my positionality because, as described by Kout (2019: 60), it is crucial to critique oneself and “the participation in systems of oppression” we might inadvertently find ourselves participating. Being a white female, I acknowledge the questionable history of Feminism, which was primarily intended only for white women: “the failure of White Feminism to adequately address the realities of women of colour” (Gray 2016: 59). I actively distance myself from the broad term of Feminism and use the term DIY to signify that my idea and goals within identifying as a feminist are more evolved than the original iterations of the movement. I understand the importance of labelling oneself as a feminist; however, I believe that it is paramount to be aware of the previously problematic nature and actions of the group using this signifier who did not stand for the betterment of all women, just white ones. In writing this paper, my goal is to advocate for female-identifying gamers of all classes, races, and sexualities. I want creative freedom, diversity, visibility, and representation for all female-identifying kinds. One main theme of my thesis would not be possible without the contributions of women of colour who first philosophised it and that would be *intersectionality*: “The concept of intersectionality has long roots, but was popularly termed by black feminist academics” (Richard 2016: 74). It is for this reason that I have tried to define DIY Feminism by looking at other feminisms that advocate for similar outcomes. One such

feminism is African Feminism. A challenge I had while engaging in this section is the issue of trying to define a particular feminism. Where one definition of the type of feminism highlighted might suit some scholars, some scholars disagree and challenge such definitions. By researching feminist theories, I conclude that defining my form of feminism can be subjective. This challenge of defining a form of feminism, is articulated in Pinkie Mekgwe's (2006) text, *Theorising African Feminism(s): the 'Colonial' Question*, where she posits that perhaps it is difficult to define such theories because the act of naming:

lies in the recognition of various and varied 'femininities' where women do not fall into neat categories such as 'the oppressed' against 'empowered men'; 'marginalised third world women as against imperialist western women' (Mekgwe 2006: 21).

Hence, my close interaction with intersectionality while defining DIY feminism within this study, as Anna Carastathis elaborates: "that intersectionality captures how oppressions are experienced simultaneously" (2014: 307). Within this chapter, there is a comparison of two activities, gaming and crocheting, as a form of gender role exploration. I discuss the performing of a gendered practice, crochet, to bring attention to and comment on the erasure of women in gaming. I am using one gendered approach to bring to light another, explained by Sallee (2016: 3): "crafting as performance is a means by which women create a female space within a male-dominated culture". I imply that both activities are implicitly gendered. I use the example of crochet as carrying the stigma of women's work even though I am aware that some of the most famous people in the world for crochet designs are male. I will provide examples of these and discuss this within the parameters of my study. However, it is important to state that I write from an autoethnographic approach that employs the technique of storytelling and my own experiences as I conduct my study. I write from the perspective of one who identifies as having an intersectional identity: "like any identity, being a gamer intersects with other identities and is experienced in relation to different social contexts" (Shaw 2012: 29). I am an artist, a gamer, a woman, an academic, and a feminist. It is from my own experience and context that I view these specific activities as gendered in this way.

DIY Feminism

My practical component embodies DIY Feminism within the context of a digital world preoccupied with simulation. The term DIY stands for ‘do it yourself’, referring to the ‘hands-on’ creation of my practical work as a response to the ways in which women creators often must operate within a digitized society. Foster (2019: 33) elaborates that:

Cultural norms structure both physical and digital spaces, often giving preference to digital fabrication such as 3D printing and coding and to a particular ‘maker’ aesthetic that historically devalues the making, crafting, and appropriating of technology led by women.

Regarding DIY Feminism, Wajcman (2010: 148-149) notes that “DIY feminists, integrate textile-based domestic arts and activities with digital communication and culture.” This speaks to my investigation of “textile-based domestic art” in the form of crochet, which I use extensively in shaping the sculptural elements of my installation to bring features of the digital game world into the sphere of material reality. An example of this creative investigation is my work, crocheting glowberry¹² vines as seen in the game Minecraft. (Mojang studios 2011) [Fig.3 & 17]. The term *domestic* stands out, as I spend most of my time working from home. As a result, I contemplate the notion of time while I work, both the time spent playing the game Minecraft and crocheting my sculptures. I often ask myself, what should I spend more time on? And why does this feeling of guilt surround me when I spend time playing a video game, which although an intrinsic part of my work, can still feel wasteful? Another researcher who was bothered by this stigma of playing video games as wasteful is Kout (2019; 12), who describes his rage towards hegemonic schooling practices portraying video games as “mere entertainment”.

My identity as a gamer and its interaction with my identity as a feminist artist is intrinsic to this study. It requires consideration as, “the relationship between ‘gamer’ and other identities, are important factors as well” (Shaw 2012: 40). As a part of my literature review, I look at *Feminine Art Game Praxis* (Westecott, Epstein, and Leitch 2013), wherein the artists explore multiple ways of creating an art game project from a feminist perspective. Westecott et al.

¹² Glowberries are a unique food item that grows on vines found in *Lush Cave* biomes, they function as a light source in the dark caves which assist in preventing hostile mobs from spawning as they give off a light level of 14 and hostile mobs require a light level of 0 to spawn. They also can be eaten to provide 2 hunger saturation. (www.sportskeeda.com/minecraft 2022).

created *PsXXYborg* (2013) [Fig.16], a piece that contemplates issues around “gendered activity in digital games both in-game playing and in-game content; feminine preference in play style; feminine game making and access to gaming” (Westecott et al 2013: 1). This piece informs my research as it deals with the conjunction of video games and fine art, the process this entails and how feminist theory aids the construction of a final product.

An important question raised in the Westecott et al. (2013: 7) text is “what is it about a particular piece that lets it be described as feminist or feminine?” or “how is feminist work identified as such without multiple judgments and exclusions evident in culture more broadly?” Being a DIY feminist and working with textile-based domestic art means being aware of what it is to create feminist work. This entails paying attention to what it is about the work that makes it this way. For example, it needs to engage certain social norms and contain aspects of feminist expression. To do this, I dissect how the art project *PsXXYborg* (2013) enacts its feminist message and subverts game culture. One example of this expression is that it critiques the tools it engages while actively using them. “PsXXborg’s uptake of cyberfeminism is pragmatic to a digital art practice interested in debasing power structures through the uptake of broadly available technologies” (Westecott et al 2013: 4). Similarly, within my practice, I critique the notion of one gendered activity by making use of another almost to a fault. In addition to this, I employ my brand of humour in my work to further my message.

The use of humour is another feminist technique, Westecott et al. (2013: 4) explain: “through the playful dropping of cues and intentional misinterpretation, *PsXXYborg* is clear that traditional game structures will not be adhered to”. My performance through crochet is not calculated and does not follow any traditional stitch patterns. I crochet what I see and reference images from the game. These sculptures are in no way perfect nor very well crocheted, I would argue. Mistakes and dropped stitches are evident when looking at them; not one sculpture is to scale. It is my playful way of making fun of what is considered women’s work. Here, I am a woman, enacting a social practice that one would assume my gender to be good at. However, I subvert this narrative by throwing myself entirely into an activity I have not taken the time to perfect and creating an exhibition that half consists of imperfect mob replicas from a game played mainly by children. The results are figures that, although recognizable to those who have played the game, have an eerie feeling of distortion. This distortion is my commentary on women’s lack of visibility and representation in gaming. It is deliberate as it subverts the

normalised narrative of expectations within gender roles and speaks to the masculine attitude I have experienced within gaming culture.

Another example that is a significant marker of feminist expression is the refusal to create work that can be considered comfortable in any normal sense of the word. Take “PsXXYborg’s explicit refusal to reproduce comfortable game tropes, in a game culture that openly lampoons anything perceived as invasive, positions it as an offensive presence” (Westecott et al 2013: 8). This notion of uncomfortable is always present in my work. I create intending to push boundaries and place people in an exhibition that does not allow them to be comfortable when faced with the art objects they are viewing. The deliberate use of the notion of being uncomfortable is my critique of masculinity in gaming culture. This can be seen in the way I use DIY Feminism to create my wonky replicas, as well as in the way I have refrained from censoring myself when recording the Ender Dragon fight or boss fight, which will be shown on a screen within ‘The End’ section of my installation.

I identify crochet within my work as a feminine practice because that’s how I see it, how it was introduced to me throughout my life. To say it is ‘women’s work’ as a blanket statement would be to erase all the masterfully created works made by people who identify as male. This is not my intention, just how I have chosen to negate a societal stereotype. Included are some works that highlight the different genders of crochet artists and their chosen art medium. However, I find it important to pause here before listing my examples of men who crochet and state that while searching for examples, I was inundated with information on female-identifying crochet artists who use their craft to challenge boundaries and disrupt the medium of fine art. I do not elaborate on these artists but is worth mentioning Haegue Yang¹³, Joanna Vasconcelos¹⁴ and Orly Genger¹⁵. These artists take the idea of women’s craft and manipulate it to challenge what womanhood, femininity and societal roles mean to modern women.

Furthermore, the men I did find describe their introduction to the art as being from someone who is female or the stigma they saw surrounding the art being one of female dominance. Hence, I find this justifies my description of crochet as ‘women’s work’.

¹³ www.kurimanzutto.com

¹⁴ www.crochetconcupiscence.com

¹⁵ orlygenger.com

The first male crochet artist I came across and whose work speaks to my own is Nathan Vincent, whose work, *Locker Room 2011* [Fig.18], is comprised of a crochet installation that automatically transports the viewer into the scene. His masterfully crocheted sculptures are exact replicas of what one would find if one looked into a male locker room. Everything is to scale, from the lockers themselves to the urinals. Vincent describes crochet as speaking “to a certain aesthetic of a particular era and type of femininity for me” and more technically, how the “holes often created in crochet take me back to DIY home décor” (TextileArtist.org 2022). He credits his mother for his introduction to crochet and describes her as “reticent” to teach him the ways of crochet, cross stitch, and knitting despite possessing the know-how to do so (TextileArtist.org 2022). His comments prove he has dealt with his own gender bias within his craft journey.

I then came across a movement called the ‘Sew Bros’ that strives to promote men’s craft on social media. These men found the art of crafting, such as knitting and crocheting, during hard times and implemented it in their lives as a form of positive change. Of note is that “although the Sew Bros are still a small group they have been slowly and steadily growing, particularly during the lockdowns of the past 18 months” (Inspiration Studios 2022). One example is a member of the Sew Bros, Vincent Williams Jr [Fig.19], who states that “it was frustrating not to see a representation of myself as a black man” as knitting was “always marketed as an elderly white lady thing to do” (The Guardian 2021).

Interestingly, while investigating the different genders of crochet artists, I confirmed that female-identifying artists dominated this sphere of the art world. Aside from that, I find it important to note that it appears that most of the artists that choose this craft as their medium have all had to deal with the challenges that come with interacting in a gendered space. This is especially true for those artists whose gender makes up the minority. Relating this to my own work, my findings in this section led me to interact with another gendered space. Analysing the duality of these two spaces, one in which my gender makes up the minority and the other where I form a part of the majority, confirmed why espousing DIY feminism through my work is an important pursuit. In addition, I have expanded my definition of whom I want to include in my pursuit of equality. While I advocate for increasing representation and visibility for female gamers, I argue that there should also be the same for male-identifying craft artists within the art world. Interacting in these contradicting gendered spaces and studying the

nuances and complexities they contain, I am reassured that intersectionality was a fitting theory to frame my study through, because of how it aids theoretical discussions, as Carastathis offers: “that four main analytic benefits are imputed to intersectionality as a research methodology: simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity” (2014: 307).

Intersectionality

Critical concepts such as intersectionality attempt to shed light on hidden mechanisms of power and oppression.

Carstensen-Egwuom 2014: 268

I take a subjective research approach within my study, which helps me to locate myself within the discourses I study. This method is also a strategy used by black feminists, as Carstensen-Egwuom (2014: 268) elaborates: “black feminist theorists encourage researchers to actually use their own subjectivity, their bodies, their positioning and their specific perspectives in interpretive research”. My investigation and research into the concept of intersectionality have been a pivotal part of my study. Once I found intersectionality as a concept, I found the words to describe how the different elements of both my practical work and mini-thesis sections combine to create the whole. Since my study focuses on an obscure section of both the art world (sculpture, installation, craft, simulation and digital art) and gaming culture (Minecraft, DIY feminism, representation, visibility), joining them into one complete project provided its challenges. However, reading feminist intersectionality papers revealed to me that just because I had issued myself a difficult task, it didn’t mean achieving it was impossible. Better yet, the whole process could be grounded in theory. Carastathis (2014: 307) summarizes: “the second purported theoretical benefit of intersectionality is that, unlike monistic approaches, it accounts for or captures experiential and structural complexity”.

I am partial to Dr Inken Carstensen-Egwuom’s explanation of the intersectionality approach. In her paper, *Connecting Intersectionality And Reflexivity: Methodological Approaches To Social Positionalities* (2014), she describes how to approach this complicated style of research is “to try to seriously, holistically and intensely understand social and cultural life in the field on its own terms, rather than subsuming it under an already established social theory or concept” (2014: 267). In this sense, I have investigated how gaming, along with technology, provides a digital departure point from a physical body as you can exist in a manner that might more suitably fit your goal. In the words of Westcott et al. (2013: 3): “The technological encounter creates a new experimental norm where one is expected to exist both physically and digitally simultaneously”. In my case, this approach allows me to give the parts of my intersectional identity that is not seen, an avenue where they can be considered and even become bigger than how I exist in the physical realm. This consideration aligns with Gray’s

(2016: 62) point that “Feminist game scholars have incorporated an intersectional focus by engaging identity, technology, and gaming”. I use my digital self to express my views and artistic inclinations in a way that does not limit me with physical restrictions. This is a very useful tool not only for my feminist message but also as a way of putting my art out there and reaching a larger audience.

As a gamer and an artist, I can create almost endlessly through the tools I can access using one of my screens, be it my computer, phone, or iPad. The only limitation is my imagination and monetary boundaries in the instance I cannot use a program because I cannot afford it. However, in the case of social media, I can share a lot more of myself than I can in a normal conversation with someone face to face. I can share my thoughts, art, and life through a series of photos, posts, and videos. I can create content for an audience who, through searching algorithms, do not even need to know me in the real world to stumble upon my work. I can separate the gamer and the artist from myself and have my work viewed without my physical looks or personality becoming an obstacle. I can choose to highlight certain aspects of myself to appear a certain way online. The aspects not seen are still a part of who I am. This is a concept I engage with while showcasing my work that speaks to these different aspects of my personality.

The idea of feminism interacting with gaming is not novel and has been problematized in the past. Perhaps the best example is the events surrounding a movement called #gamergate. Gamergate was a misogynistic free-to-join online harassment campaign that existed from 2014 to 2015. It was founded as a form of backlash against feminism, inclusivism, and progressivism in gaming culture. “Members of the #gamergate movement allege that there is corruption in video games journalism and that feminists are actively working to undermine the video game industry” (Kout 2019: 149). The main goal of the campaign was to spread the prejudice that “feminists are not part of the video gaming community, that they are outsiders”, and that “video gaming culture belongs to the players who do not identify as feminists” (Kout 2019: 149). The events of #gamergate took place nearly eight years ago, yet female gamers and feminists are still trying to fight for space within this community to which we see ourselves as belonging.

Where the members of Gamergate adamantly advocated against the integration of feminism and gaming, I take the exact opposite stance. Because the world of computer gaming is such an overwhelmingly popular space with both genders, it is not a fight that should be considered

only a female one. There are so many wonderful opportunities for both male and female gamers to collaborate and interact that I feel it is a cause for both genders to get behind. In this way, I borrow from Mekgwe's text where she hypothesises that African Feminism will be successful if it is considered a collaborative theory and practice. Mekgwe (2006: 16) states:

If African feminism is to succeed as a humane reformation project, it cannot accept separatism from the opposite sex. Eschewing male exclusion then, becomes one defining feature of African feminism that differentiates it from feminism as it is conceptualised in the west.

My definition of DIY Feminism embodies this statement as I would not have been able to get as far as I have in my gaming journey without the help of my partner and my male friends with whom I LAN¹⁶. They have helped teach me how to game on a PC and have given me access to games I would not have had the courage to explore by myself. In addition, playing challenging games with them helped me perceive gaming through their eyes, giving me a better understanding of how male gamers interact in the sphere of gaming culture. Hence, "a gender perspective is valid and productive in its effort to illuminate the blind spots of cultural norms and otherwise unquestioned hierarchies" (Carstensen-Egwuom 2014: 269). This understanding gives me the confidence to no longer shy away from negative interactions such as abuse over the game chat from other males. They have taught me that receiving this abuse should not stop you from playing a game you love because you can choose not to take the negative comments personally, which is something I have done in previous gaming interactions.

Looking at gaming through the perspective of one another's eyes aids in a mutual understanding that can be turned into a proactive and inclusive form of feminism. As Richard (2016: 86) explains: "Increased representation, while controversial, can help to diversify how game culture comes to embrace and support women, minorities and queer players, particularly if done in ways that defy and diversify old tropes". My proactive solution to the issue of visibility and representation in gaming is my practical application of DIY Feminism in creating an exhibition that relates to the issues at hand. Helene Cixous (1976: 875) stated: "that women must write themselves into being". My theory is that one cannot hope to have a say in the world if one cannot put themselves into it. It is my job as a feminist, artist, and gamer to carve out a

¹⁶ LAN gaming is a type of gaming that allows players to connect to a Local Area Network (LAN) to play multiplayer video games with each other online in the same place. It requires each player to have their own device that they all connect to one another in order to play on the same server. (alibabacloud.com).

space for myself where no room is offered. This links to the feminist writings of Virginia Woolf, who in 1929 wrote *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf argued that for a woman to be successful, she had to create her own space to write, where she would not be dependent (especially in the case of money) on men to be successful. In her words, “a woman must have a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” (Woolf 1929: 4). Kaur and Sativa explain Woolf’s theory as follows: “owning a specific room, a highly clever woman’s fate, historical events and even a woman’s identity could all be altered if she obtains the ability to earn her own money” (2021: 4974).

Similarly, I believe that female-identifying gamers have to create a space for themselves where our existence in gaming culture will thrive, in turn bridging the gap between the genders. My study is a small start, but it is a start regardless. It is an undertaking to exist in a world that makes it difficult for me. I’m here, I’m creating and contributing to the knowledge around this discourse using my own definition of feminism aided by intersectionality, and that is hopefully good enough.

Crochet As Women's Work

This subsection gives an example of a female artist who explores craft materials in the contemporary art space to speak back to the gendered nature of gaming culture. As a form of feminist expression, I have titled this subsection *Crochet As Women's Work*. It is an ironic comment on the fact that this gendered space consists of both genders using their craft to negate this stigma. As seen through my analysis of the medium of crochet, the inclusivity of DIY Feminism, and intersectionality as theoretical concepts. In this subsection, I analyse the work of a female artist who does not use crochet but uses other craft materials that fall under the banner of female crafts. I then relate my interpretation and reading of her work to my own, which depends heavily on crochet as a medium. I also investigate how female-identifying artists are portrayed in an exhibition that is focused on games and gaming culture by analysing the *Open World* exhibition featured at the Oklahoma Contemporary Art Museum.

Krista Hoefle is an artist who has used a craft approach to discourse the world of gaming before I. She achieved this by manipulating the pixelated forms of early arcade games, which she turned into a geometric construction of quilts. In a series titled *Open World* [Fig.20], Hoefle places these quilts in galleries to give gallery-goers real-life first-person experiences with the game. I explore a similar approach in my creative practice by bringing mobs from inside the game out of the screen in the form of crochet sculptures [Fig.12]. The works in Hoefle's exhibition resonate with my project in the sense that Minecraft is an open-world game. In both practice and thesis, my research engages the *Open World* exhibition with a specific focus on Hoefle's work *Invaders* (2019) [Fig.21].

The *Open World* exhibition curated by Theresa Bembnister, originally for the Akron Art Museum, took place in the Eleanor Kirkpatrick Main Gallery at Oklahoma Contemporary Art Museum from the 21st of October 2021 to the 21st of February 2022. To fully understand how the exhibition was laid out and its goals, I watched the video tour by Artistic Director Jeremiah Matthew Davis. The link to the tour was posted on the gallery's website and was uploaded to YouTube (Open World Video Tour 2022). Davis states that this exhibition exemplifies that it is a known fact that video games are already considered a form of art and explains that the exhibition explores a variety of works and disciplines that all focus on the intersection of gaming and contemporary art. Much like my own master's work, hence, my interest and

inclusion of this exhibition in this section. Through the more than 70 objects on display within the exhibition, Davis (2022 0:44) elucidates that the exhibition investigates:

ideas around video game culture, design, technology, visual artistry, and sound work together in imaginary worlds in order to reflect on issues, experiences, realities, socio-economic conditions, and other political factors at play in the world around us.

Davis goes on to say that in the United States over 60% of Americans play video games regularly and follows this statement with: “due to the revolution of smartphone technology, as of today women comprise the majority of gamers” (Davis 2022 2:02). He does not elaborate how these two points correlate or where he got his source material from, but I thought it a poignant point to mention, especially because the exhibition itself does not reflect this with most works being from male-identifying artists. Within the exhibition, there are 14 male-identifying artists on show, six female-identifying artists, and one non-binary artist. Besides Hoefle, included in these female-identifying artists are Angela Washko and Joan Pemboukes, who also use their work to perpetuate their feminist messages incorporated in the integration of contemporary art and gaming culture.

I have decided to analyse Hoefle’s work because I relate to her as both an artist and a woman. Our goals are similar in using our art to simulate different realities around the intertwining of gaming worlds and the tactility of sculpture. In her artist statement available on her website www.kristahoefle.com, she describes her creative practice as questioning “all aspects of game structure and culture in an attempt to expand the (still) gendered nature of these spaces” (Hoefle 2022). Her personal experiences with gaming and game culture shape the work she creates much in the same way mine does. Through her use of visual storytelling, I am inspired but also find some solace in the fact that accomplished artists are spreading the same message through their work that I spread.

In Hoefle’s work *Invaders* (2019) [Fig.21], she uses brightly coloured textiles to illustrate a stylized version of one of the first available arcade games called *Space Invaders*. Describing the mechanics of the game, Virk writes (2019: 37): “In Space Invaders, you could only move left and right at a constant speed and shoot upward at the aliens”. She has replicated the original imagery from the game using her understanding of the material to simulate the early pixelated feel of first-generation arcade games by constructing images out of blocks and combining them

to form shapes that mimic the game's design. Her expressive use of colour and the choice of upholstery material juxtapose the cold blinking aura of a game's software with the warmth of one's home. The spaceship, which consists of a rigid block form, can be seen shooting at a pair of cherries constructed to look pixelated. The ammunition used is represented as it would be seen on screen in the arcade as simple blocks assembled in a line. Hoefle has captured the aesthetic of the game *Space Invaders* but has also corrupted it with her design brand, making it unique. It is a physical iteration of corrupted software or her way of hacking into this very well-known space brought to life using craft. Her simulated *Space Invaders* quilt tells a story that can be interpreted in many ways by gallery-goers, but that is also host to her message. In this instance, *Invaders* simulates something without using a digital medium or computer program as a form of visual storytelling. This relates to Djikie and Oatly's (2017: 161) point that "stories may have been the very first simulations, invented before computers".

The term *Invaders* is multifaceted, as it can apply to many aspects of a woman's life. It can be interpreted in a personal manner, from a woman's perspective, the discomfort of having your space invaded, whether it is your personal physical space or the way women are easily objectified while doing mundane daily activities such as walking down the street. It is a social commentary on how things tend to operate in a society run by the patriarchy. Additionally, it can be interpreted digitally, like within a modern game; it could be referring to other players that spend their time making the game unpleasant for some by using tactics such as *griefing*¹⁷ or *trolling*¹⁸. It could also be a literal reference to them invading your game base and stealing your *loot*¹⁹ or them generally being insufferable online. The term *Invaders* encapsulates the complicated reality of being a woman on the internet by highlighting the dangers of these uninvited interactions, whether it is a comment or a presence that forces itself into your safe space in the hopes of generating a reaction,

¹⁷ Griefing is an act whereby a player that is part of an online community intentionally disrupts other players' gameplay to cause annoyance or in more severe cases harass them by using game mechanics to destroy what other players have built. (techopedia.com 2022).

¹⁸ Trolling is an action by a person who comments or posts insensitive, provocative, nonessential, and hurtful messages with the intent of provoking others to get upset or angry. And trolls enjoy the emotional reaction of people who are offended by what they say. (techopedia.com 2022).

¹⁹ Loot refers to the plundered goods from questing, exploring or person vs person battling, or the rewards earned from playing the game. (cyberdefinitions.com 2022).

Griefing, the purposeful use of digital affordances to destroy another user's pleasure or freedom of movement, is a perennial practice, and women, people of colour, and sexual minorities are targeted more than others (Nakamura 2016: 35).

This chapter discussed my definition of *DIY Feminism* and how I got to it through researching other feminisms and the theoretical writings about them. It explained the theory of *Intersectionality*, why I use it in my study and why I consider myself to have an intersectional identity. It detailed how these concepts could be combined within the sphere of gaming to remedy the issue of the lack of representation and visibility of female-identifying gamers. This chapter also explained why I assigned crochet to the term 'woman's work'. It explored an artist who uses craft in a contemporary art environment to discourse the challenges faced by female gamers. The next chapter describes my phenomenological approach to using DIY Feminism as a strategy to respond to the gendered world of gaming.

Chapter 3: My Own Work As A Response To The Gendered World Of Gaming, Using DIY Feminism As A Strategy.

This chapter details the phenomenological approach I took to my practical work and how I extended the idea of DIY Feminism further than a concept to incorporate it as a practical strategy while producing my artwork. My process for DIY Feminism as a strategy is divided into three parts; therefore, this chapter comprises three subsections under the headings *Write*, *Play* and *Crochet*. They explain how I, during this study, embodied these processes to further connect with my subject matter and bring my exhibition and complementary mini-thesis to life. The first subsection, *Write*, details the creative writing approach I take when writing and contemplating my themes and ideas, expanding from just words on a page and instead creating my own book that acts as a compilation of ideas and contemplations. I have called this book of ideas my *Craft Tome* as I took inspiration from fantasy games where magical books for spellcasting are an accessible part of gameplay. The second subsection, *Play*, describes the importance of self-identifying as a gamer, how it has affected my study and the different challenges I faced when integrating the gamer aspect of my personality into the fine art sphere. The third subsection is *Crochet* and details the way I felt about creating my sculptures and how I felt I breathed life into them. Combining academic pursuits with the unpredictability of the studio space, I created my own praxis and answered the question: But what true structure did the player create in the reality behind the screen?

Write

It is reading our thoughts as though they were words on a screen. That is how it chooses to imagine many things, when it is deep in the dream of a game.

End Poem 2022.

This subsection details my writing experience: How I created my *Craft Tome* and how this process aided me in writing my mini-thesis. The pivotal moment for me at the beginning of this study was when my curiosity got the better of me. One day I decided to look up the End Poem that is revealed to the player in an end credit scene once they have defeated the Ender Dragon and jumped back through the portal at the end of the game Minecraft. At the time, Minecraft was my favourite game to play and hardly a day would go by when I did not lose myself in it for hours at a time. Despite the hours of gameplay logged, I had yet to reach the actual end of the game as I had built up the final encounter with the dragon to be a daunting task in my mind. Instead, I would ignore the existence of the End dimension in my survival world and focus on building villages and exploring the never-ending landscape that would continuously generate in front of my avatar in the hopes of discovering new resources to loot or exciting-looking areas to re-establish myself. However, after I read the End Poem, I was moved by how philosophical the meaning behind it seemed to be. Especially for a game that children mostly played. The question: But what true structure did this player create in the reality behind the screen? Posed by the ethereal unseen beings talking about my character got me thinking about how I, as an artist, create things in reality and, as a gamer, embody this digitally. It was at this moment that I decided I wanted to investigate this phenomenon further and inspect the discourses that surround it in more detail. I asked myself, how do I integrate these two aspects of my personality every day whether intentionally or not?

I am a visual learner and find that when I try to map out essays, I am not able to do so without a mind map and the use of colour. I learn best through illustrative material, and so when planning this study out in my head, I could not simply place my thoughts onto paper as they came out jumbled and nonsensical. It wasn't until I stopped trying to do it the way I thought an academic would and just started doing it the way that I combined my thoughts and feelings with craft and the plan for my study took form in the shape of a visual journal. As Kout (2019: 68) describes, "writers/researchers bring experiences to consciousness through articulating thoughts and feelings". As I added images, drawings and various collected materials to this

journal, I realised that it was becoming a roadmap to how I ended up creating my wonky sculptures. It started with my previous experiments done in the studio when initially I thought I wanted to use the medium of ceramics to portray my investigation of the integration of video games and contemporary art. It then evolved into my contemplations around a certain aspect of my study, for example, what it meant to me to see myself as a gamer [Fig.25]. This creative map of this contemplation shows the illustrations of my Minecraft character, me interacting with my handmade Minecraft elements and the colourful representations of my gamer personality. My *Craft Tome* also shows practical contemplations and material experimentation, like how I see the End dimension artistically and how I would simulate the lush cave biome with my crafted Glowberries [Fig.26].

It also shows how I discovered that there are many routes one could take to attempt to simulate something, especially when it comes to digital media and all the options available. There is a difference between *virtual reality*, where a person can fully immerse themselves in a fabricated reality using special glasses and *augmented reality*, where layers of manipulated media are placed on top of something and only brought to life through the use of a specific lens, whether it be a phone or tablet. I started my simulation journey within my work, trying to use augmented reality. I painted scenes from Minecraft landscapes and then embroidered on them, creating craft composites. After the craft composites were complete, I recorded my Minecraft avatar's perspective of me manipulating the actual environment that the painting was based on in-game. With this recording, I used a free website called Artivive that allows one to place videos, sound, recordings, and other digital media over a picture. The result of this is that when the picture is scanned through the app and looked through a phone lens, the augmentation is revealed and the source image is revealed.

I created three of these craft composites and used augmented reality with all of them to showcase simulation in practice. The first craft composite [Fig.22] features a scene from a lush cave biome. When scanned through the Artivive app, it brings to life a scene that shows glow squids²⁰ interacting in the space such as floating in the water or dying as they get stuck outside of the water blocks. The second craft composite [Fig.23] shows some of the beautiful digitally generated landscapes found in the Overworld in Minecraft. When scanned through the Artivive

²⁰ Glow squids are aquatic passive mobs found in dark underwater areas like deep oceans, ravines and underground bodies of water. (Minecraft Wiki 2022)

app, a short video of my character jumping up and down on the treetops is revealed. The third craft, composite [Fig.24], shows a landscape of one of the biomes located within the Nether dimension. This biome is called a Warped Forest and consists of blue warped fungus trees. You can see the deadly nature of this biome through my inclusion of the many lava falls that naturally generate in this area as well as a glimpse of the vast lava lakes located in the lower levels of the Nether. When scanned through the Artivive app, a video including real-time game sounds plays that show my character fighting Endermen. Endermen are passive mobs until you look at them which is what engages their fight mode. Once this happens, they can turn deadly and are difficult to fight as they constantly teleport around the player and land hits when you least expect it. In this clip, I fight them until I die, and a death screen appears. This experimentation with augmented reality was enlightening as I learned a new technical skill and opened myself up to new possibilities of art making. However, it depended very heavily on technology to produce the desired effect and I felt this went against what I was trying to achieve by using crochet to simulate a masculine activity. I then added these craft composites to my *Craft Tome* as a form of field research.

As I started to fill the pages of my *Craft Tome* with colourful images and illustrative contemplations, I noticed that the outside of this book did not match the theme of what was hiding between its pages. Thus, I decided to craft the outside of the tome so that it would represent the magical spell book aesthetic I was creating within. I accomplished this by crocheting a cover for it using wool I had laying around as a form of a found object project mixed with elements of DIY strategy. I then added to this by embroidering on top of it and adding different craft elements to give it a magical craft feel [Fig.13]. I found joy in this process and I continued to work on it because I felt it became an integral part of this study. Therefore, I decided to include it in my exhibition and will display it on a lectern within my simulated lush cave space. I felt my process of writing links to what Kout (2019: 68) describes: “Language and writing are tools we use to experiment with and bring our world into existence”. And this is what the *Craft Tome* does; it brings this world I have created behind the screen to life.

Play

We need to ask who the players are, why they choose to play the games they play, and what they get from them. We can only achieve this by diving into players' intimacy.

Kout 2019: 16

I am a gamer. I play games. The specific game is not so important, but the self-identification of the gamer that I have accepted as an aspect of my personality will exist for a long time. This study has been incredibly beneficial to me as I feel it helped me with coming to terms with how my artistic, gamer and feminist aspects conjoin and intermingle. A concept I came across during this study is the idea of *flow*. As McGonigal (2011: 40) describes: "flow is the extreme neurochemical activation that happens in our brains and bodies when we start to play a good computer or video game". This concept of flow is one that I have embodied while playing Minecraft to reach my specific goals within this study. It is a state of mind I inhabit when creating both my virtual Minecraft world and my craft world for exhibition. Kout (2019: 197) further explains that: "Flow is experienced by gamers when their engagement is at its peak, one of the consequences of flow is that players lose themselves in the game through immersion and engagement".

As previously stated, I recorded my gameplay while engaging in Minecraft for this study. These recordings act as a form of field research but can also be used as an example to show my embodiment of this concept in practice. This example shows as McGonigal (2011:40) states, "being highly focussed, highly motivated, creatively charged, and working at the very limits of our abilities". Within the installation of my exhibition, I show three video pieces taken from these recordings. The first piece is a clip of the gameplay of my character progressing through the Overworld while marking off notable survival goals. It is a first-person account of me playing through the eyes of my character, documenting in this viewpoint what I have created, sculpted, and generated in the environment around me. The goal of the first video is to show how I survived, played, and manipulated this world to get to the End Poem.

I am digitally creating a space for my character in a world void of all other influences - a metaphorical performance of how women need to create a space for themselves within gaming culture. The second video shows my character raiding a Nether Fortress in the hellish landscape of the second dimension The Nether. This performance can be equated to the navigation of

social injustices and prejudices in a gendered space where you make up the minority and have to fight for the right to exist on the same plane as those who make up the majority. The third video shows endgame gameplay where I take on the game's main boss, the Ender Dragon. This video serves to highlight some of the relationships my intersection identity contains as a gamer, a woman, and an artist. This intervention is important as before this point in my study, I have spoken about the different aspects of my personality, but there has yet to be empirical visual proof of me being a gamer aside from images within my *Craft Tome*. I said I am one, so it is safe to assume that I write from that perspective. I debated for a while whether or not to include this visual aspect, but I feel that it serves a purpose among my other creations. In this video, I film myself fighting the dragon in a style that I call streamer²¹ style. I filmed it in a way that many well-known gamers film some of their lets-play series²². These are often filmed with a split screen. One screen shows the gamer's real-time reactions and responses, while the other screen shows the game as they play it. This means that what I am doing in the game is seen, but there is a dual-screen that shows my reactions in real-time to what is happening and the challenges I face during this fight. I took my time contemplating making this video in this specific way as I was unable to edit my reactions after the fight, and I only had one opportunity to film it as I created this project in a survival world. If I messed up the recording of the fight, I would not be able to re-record it. This meant deciding how I was going to present myself as a gamer.

I wanted to avoid the stereotypical gamer girl trope which is synonymous with having to create a cute (overly feminised) manner about yourself when gaming: “the trope of the gamer girl in which gamers are notable by their existence in the masculine space of gaming, accordingly they are presented as objects of fascination and are eroticised” (Macey & McCauley 2018: 7). However, I was surprised by my hesitation to present myself how I normally appear behind the screen while playing. This normally means a messy bun, prescription glasses, my favourite hoodie that I’ve probably worn for a few days in a row, and sweatpants. The idea of showing a room full of an unknown amount of people that version of me seemed too raw with too much vulnerability on my part. This issue of my vanity made me question myself as a feminist. Probing the question: Is it antifeminist to care about what you look like? After deliberating, I decided that I wanted to look presentable when showing a video of myself and a culmination

²¹ A person who live broadcasts themselves playing a video game to an online audience. (Computerhope.com).

²² Playing the game in a step-by-step manner.

of two years' worth of work and that it's not antifeminist to want to look presentable. A woman has the right to choose how to present herself and it was my choice just how much of my gamer identity I choose to show. I decided to combine the artist and gamer in me and present myself how I would for an academic presentation or a gallery show. Wearing items of clothing that are unique to me, resemble my character and have an air of professionalism about them. These feelings of vulnerability are of note within my study especially as it pertains to phenomenology because, as explained by Carstensen-Egwuom (2014: 267): "the subjectivity and bodily experiences of the researcher's own self, whose cognitive, emotional, bodily and spiritual reactions are a central research instrument" are important aspects of knowledge production within a study focussed on defining a kind of feminism.

Another issue I had when contemplating this video was: Since I am creating an exhibition based on a children's game, should profanity be allowed? This is an issue for me that I must edit these recordings into videos as I am unable to be anything but authentic when faced with the task of a boss fight and in my case, this means swearing. I cannot change my reaction to the events, but I can edit out sounds that may offend within the video once recorded. I decided that if I wanted it to resemble the truest version of myself, I would leave it as is. Minecraft is a wonderful game that is inclusive of all ages and peoples. I want my work which simulates it, to do the same. One could edit out the curse words with comical beeping to add humour to an already humorous video; however, this recalls other outdated female stereotypes I do not wish to indulge, such as it is unbecoming of a lady to swear. By refraining from censoring myself when recording the boss fight, I highlight the contradiction within my intersectional identity as I must choose which parts of myself are on display for different occasions. This lack of censorship would not be ideal if, for example, I was to post the video of me fighting the Ender dragon onto YouTube under my gamer alias "MsBumbleT". I would have to censor myself if amassing viewership was my goal, as most consumers of Minecraft content are children. For gamers working in the digital reality of gamer professionalism, "increasing presence of gameplay as professional spectatorship, through popular outlets like Twitch.tv" (Richard 2016:86), who would strive towards sponsorship by game companies to create content with their games, censorship is a necessary act. However, in the sphere of the art world, for the sake of the feminist message I hope to convey, I wish to portray myself 'as is' when fighting a dragon which includes swearing. This may not seem like a critical inversion of the norm but in my context, in my familial structure, I have been chastised for swearing many times and told to behave in a manner befitting of a 'young lady'. It is precisely these types of commenters

whose feathers I ruffle within my body of work. To highlight the message that I should not have to perform a certain way to be taken seriously as an artist or even more generally as a woman. My stance on presenting my reactions 'as is' then help to “render visible phenomenological experiences of people who face multiple forms of oppression without fragmenting experiences through categorical exclusion” (Carastathis 2014: 307).

Crochet

Arts-led research is a specific approach to new knowledge generation that prioritises the critical vision, reflexive action and technological agency of art practitioners.

Sullivan 2005: 3

I was inspired as an artist to replicate this feeling of awe in fantasy spaces because when it comes down to it, in my opinion, contemporary art and fantasy game culture are very similar. I wanted to use this passion for fantasy exploration in my art and create something that speaks to this virtual space by bringing it out of the screen into the bounds of a tangible reality. It was a challenge I had issued myself for the duration of my master's project. Would I be able to breathe life into this imagined space that was not yet real? My idea of a fantasy game space brought into the real takes shape in the form of an interactive art installation where I hope to create the opportunity for people to step into my physical reality behind the screen. In this way, gallery-goers will be able to experience this inversion of the intangibility of a virtual gaming world made tangible, where they do not need to have any prior gaming knowledge to be immersed. This space will imitate a game by making use of multicoloured lights and have the music Minecraft is famous for, playing in the central exhibition space. While people move through the space to the sound of the music, they will then experience in real time the different realms a player has to navigate within the game before reaching the end. Thus, simulating the process of game progression which they can explore and inhabit with their own physical bodies. When they reach the end of the simulated game progression, they will step through a square doorway to a secret exit out of the space, imitating the journey through the portal one exits the End dimension with. Only once they have stepped through the portal will they be faced with the End Poem playing on a loop in the style of the way it is seen at the end of the game Minecraft.

It is important to emphasize the *art-making* process in my study, following the explanation given by Westecott et al (2013: 19), "the process of making this art game is as important as the resulting artefact". Artists always say that they feel like they leave a little piece of themselves within the work they create. This is more than some philosophical statement in my case as I have noticed on many occasions that while crocheting, strands of my hair get entangled with the wool and end up woven into my sculptures. This then links to the statement by Westecott et al. in this instance, as every piece created for this exhibition is a part of me, and I will be

forever a part of the separate pieces that will combine to make the whole installation. The strands of hair that connect me to my sculptures are reminiscent of my connection to the study as a whole. If Minecraft blocks were to be brought out of the screen and laid out before us, one block is 1 meter in length and 1m^3 in volume (Minecraft Wiki 2022). I have made the conscious decision not to stick to this form of measurement when I create my sculptures of entities found within the game partly, because of the time it would take to craft in such specific dimensions and the scientific approach required. This does not suit my style of artmaking, and mathematic measurements intimidate me.

Creating these sculptures intuitively with no structured guide allows for these pieces to take a form of their own and come alive under my crochet needle. The absence of structure allows for the crochet to warp easily, resulting in the sculptures being organic, amorphous, and ambiguous. These soft-form sculptures developed their own personalities as they were made. While making these types of sculptures, intentionally using feminist ideologies to create my strategy, I unintentionally created a pattern that I was not able to see until my mob replicas were finished and I decided how I would display them. I already knew which ones would be hanging in the air as if floating or flying, as these were based on mobs that already do so within the game. When I took a step back and took in my work with a wider, less focused lens, I noticed that I had made the air mobs from nothing but wool and stuffing resulting in squishy sculptures.

Conversely, for the mobs that spawn on the ground, I had created a semblance of the square structure that the game is known for by crocheting around a haphazard box skeleton. The use of the boxes as skeleton structures for the ground mobs was so that I could create finer details when embroidering on top of the crochet, as the ground mobs were based on references that tend to be more detailed within the game. This aided in the illusion that these ground mobs can stand on their own on top of the soft legs I had made for them. The result of this is that the structures that make use of their legs imitate the mobs within the game but still exist as their own entities outside of it. A simulation of the real.

This chapter highlighted how I approached my own work using my own definition of DIY Feminism as a strategy, to create an exhibition that uses a feminine craft to talk back to a masculine activity. It explained how using creative writing helped bring my ideas out of an imagined space and into a tangible reality.

Conclusion

In this mini-thesis, I have made use of a variety of methodological approaches in order to form my own praxis around intersectional identities and gaming culture. These approaches are with specific reference to how to go against male-dominated spaces as an artist using DIY Feminism and Minecraft imagery. This undertaking culminated in an interactive art installation that looks at how I fabricate 'My Craft' by taking elements from Minecraft. The overall exhibition being the experience of my installation, which I have titled *My Craft: Building True Worlds In Reality*, is the answer to my research question within my mini-thesis: How do we go about navigating a player's in-game experience with the player's lived experience behind the screen? It shows how I have contemplated all the aspects of being a female gamer participating in gamer culture, which remains male-dominated. I investigated how I am affected by this space both digitally and from behind the screen.

My art is employed to bring to light a very real problem using feminist expression techniques. I have then used my investigation of this study to build a physical gaming reality that one can step into and inhabit with their physical body linking to the question posed by the End Poem: but what true structure did this player create behind the screen? I have answered this by physically crafting sculptures as well as structuring and formulating my definition of DIY Feminism with links to intersectionality that show the multiple aspects of my personality that combined to create this study. Through an in-depth look at how I navigate the different spaces where my study takes place, I used a subjective approach to inform my research. The approach involved recording and analysing my field notes that focussed on gameplay sessions and my interaction with gamer culture as a female-identifying gamer. The answer to my research question can be seen in my investigation into the topic and the resulting interactive art installation that showcases my work. This study has much room to grow as I still feel some areas of my research could be delved into deeper.

This study used an intersectional approach to look at all the different areas female-identifying gamers are affected by this gendered space. It was a complex study. In the future, I feel I could improve on it by investigating each section a bit deeper. If I were to expand on this study, I would also like to include more first-hand accounts by other female gamers. This study not only helped me to understand myself better but also improved my relationship with other gamers, by taking me from being mainly a solo gamer to forming friendships that led to team

gameplay, “it feels good to have a group of friends to play a game we love and have fun in together. Also playing against other people in real time lends itself to many unexpected and hilarious moments” (Appendix D). These reflections on my gaming experiences reiterate for me why I want to be a part of gaming culture because when you find the right gaming community you are able to build friendships and feel accepted.

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Illustrations



Fig.1. Minecraft Wiki. *Lush Cave*. Available at: https://minecraft-archive.fandom.com/wiki/Lush_cave [Accessed October 31, 2022].

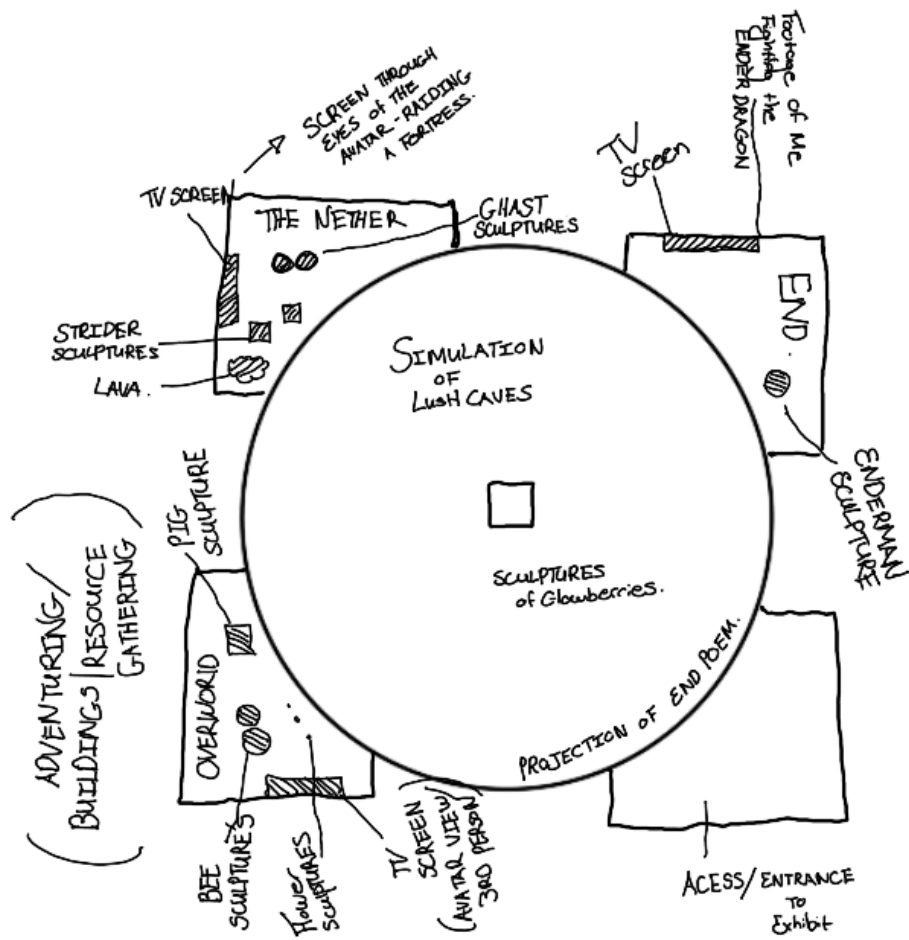


Fig.2. Tayla Mackintosh. *Map of Exhibit Layout* (2022). Digital drawing.



Fig.3. Minecraft Wiki. *Glowberries*. Available at: https://minecraft-archive.fandom.com/wiki/Glow_Berries [Accessed May 6, 2022].



Fig.4. Tayla Mackintosh. *Bees* (2022). Wool, stuffing, crochet, embroidery.



Fig.5. Tayla Mackintosh. *Pig* (2022). Wool, stuffing, crochet, embroidery.



Fig.6. Tayla Mackintosh. *Flowers* (2022). Wool, wire, crochet.



Fig.7. Tayla Mackintosh. *Ghasts* (2021). Wool, stuffing, crochet, embroidery.



Fig.8. Tayla Mackintosh. *Striders* (2022). Wool, stuffing, crochet, embroidery.



Fig.9. Minecraft Wiki. *Blaze*. Available at: <https://minecraft-archive.fandom.com/wiki/Blaze> [Accessed October 31, 2022].

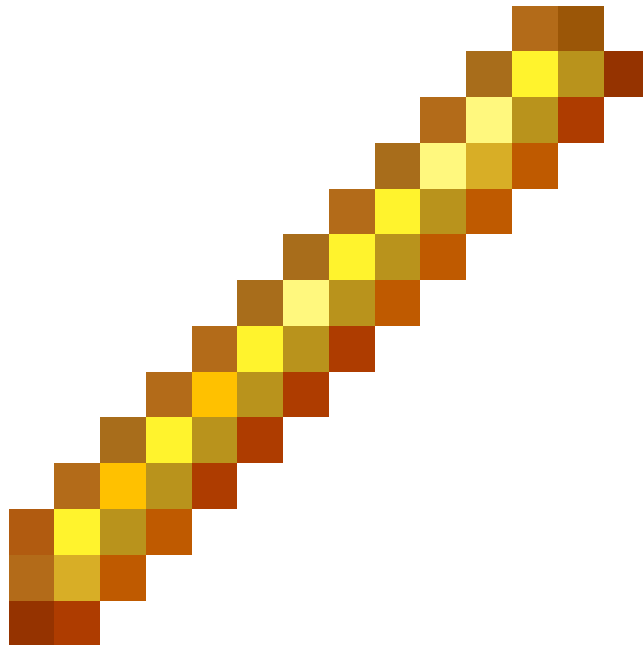


Fig.10. Minecraft Wiki. *Blaze Rod*. Available at: https://minecraft-archive.fandom.com/wiki/Blaze_Rod [Accessed October 31, 2022].

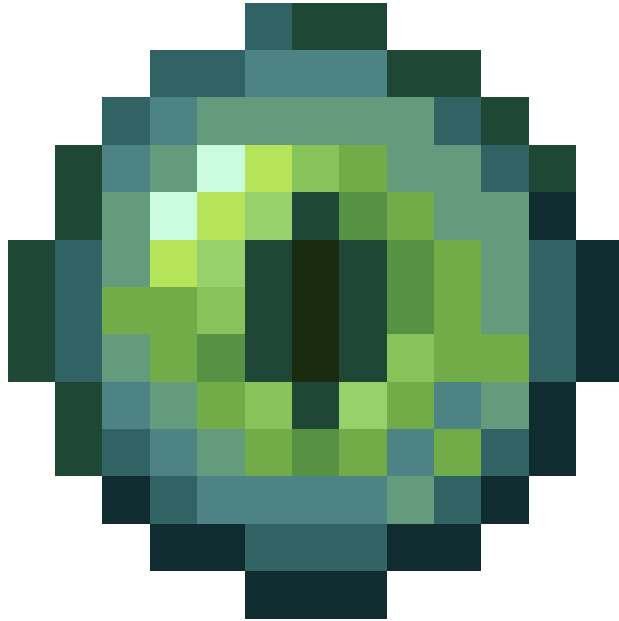


Fig.11. Minecraft Wiki. *Eye of Ender*. Available at: https://minecraft-archive.fandom.com/wiki/Eye_of_Ender [Accessed October 31, 2022].



Fig.12. Tayla Mackintosh. *Enderman* (2022), wool, stuffing, crochet.



Fig.13. Tayla Mackintosh. (2022), *Craft Tome (front view)*, embroidery, wool.



Fig.14. Tayla Mackintosh. (2022), *Craft Tome (side view)*, embroidery, wool.



Fig.15. Survival mode in *Minecraft*. The health and hunger bars, as well as the hot bar, are visible in this picture. <https://minecraft.fandom.com/wiki/Survival>



Fig.16. Emma Westecott, Hannah Epstein, and, Alexandra Leitch. a still from *PsXXXYborg* (2013), Digital art, mixed media, *PsXXXYborg*, (taken from *Feminist art game praxis*. In: DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies, August 26-29, 2013, Atlanta, Georgia, USA



Fig.17. Tayla Mackintosh. *Glowberries* (2022), wool, stuffing, crochet.



Fig.18. Nathan Vincent. *Locker Room* (2011), yarn, foam, wood, photo credit Steven Miller. (image taken from <https://www.textileartist.org/nathan-vincent-the-mystery-of-creation/>)



Fig.19. Vincent Williams Jr: 'Knitting can be healing.' Photograph: courtesy of Vincent Williams Jr 2022, image taken from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/apr/10/it-was-seen-as-an-elderly-white-lady-thing-to-do-meet-the-new-generation-of-male-knitters>



Fig.20. Installation view. *Open World*, (October 2019- February 2020), view of *Pitfall* and *Invaders*. (image taken from <http://www.kristahoeffe.com/#/open-world1>). Curated by Theresa Bembnister



Fig.22. Tayla Mackintosh. *Craft Composite* (2021). Oil paint, embroidery, wool, augmented reality. Craft Tome Documentation.



Fig.23. Tayla Mackintosh. *Craft Composite* (2021). Oil paint, augmented reality. Craft Tome Documentation.



Fig.24. Tayla Mackintosh. *Craft Composite* (2021). Oil paint, embroidery, wool, augmented reality. Craft Tome Documentation.



Fig.25. Tayla Mackintosh. (2021), *To be a gamer visual contemplation*. The picture is of the inside of the Craft Tome.



Fig.26. Tayla Mackintosh. (2021), *The End visual contemplation and Vine making process visual contemplation*. The picture was taken of the inside of the Craft Tome.

Appendices

Reflections on My Gaming Experiences

Appendix A: Minecraft Part 1

Having someone that lives on the same property as me and shares my enthusiasm for Minecraft was super exciting at first. Considering speaking in Minecraft terms can be frustrating for those around me who have no idea what I'm talking about, I was pleased to have another person to converse in this digital language with. We were at a braai with the neighbours when the topic of my master's degree came up. I'm always slightly hesitant to dive into an explanation of what it is I am researching because I'm not sure I fully understand my need for researching it entirely. It becomes especially tedious to explain when people don't understand gaming or specifically the game Minecraft because to them I assume it looks like some sort of weird fixation on my part to emulate a children's game. This time was different though because as soon as I mumbled the word Minecraft Tim's face lit up and he was suddenly heavily invested in what I was saying. Before I could even finish my explanation I was met with an enthusiastic

“Dude no way! I play that game all the time!”

This was a nice change for me because the people I normally talked to about Minecraft had left University the previous year and I had been desperately missing our friendship and connection over this shared love of the game.

“You should see my world! It's so sick, I've spent hours setting it up.”

“Yes,” said Tim's girlfriend apathetically. “He spends HOURS on there.”

“Oh really?” I said, “I would love to check it out sometime.”

After some talk about our favourite aspects of the game, the conversation changed to shared servers and LAN-ing, something I had done with my previous friends before they left to pursue their individual careers and the time that they invested into gaming became virtually non-existent. I explained how I had found a website that allows you to set up a shared server for free and suggested that we should start a new world together as it would be nice to play with someone again. Minecraft is such a wonderful game as it offers such a wide variety of experiences, pleasurable when playing with people or even playing solo. I showed Tim some pictures of the world I was currently playing in and building, I hadn't gotten very far in it but my main focus had been improving my building style and experimenting with the block pallets I choose for builds. After what felt like an hour we walked over to Tim's apartment so that he could show me the world that he had been playing in for the better part of a year and a half. Looking at his set up it was exactly what I had expected from a male university student. It's nothing too spectacular, but you could tell he gamed because he had his very own 'Frankenstein computer on the floor next to his monitor. This is a term used by people who build their own computers. It sounds more impressive than it is, they basically buy the different components of a computer separately and then assemble it themselves in a dodgy-looking computer case which I had seen more than one guy spray paint white. I don't know why maybe because it was supposed to look all futuristic and cool in collaboration with the RGB lights of their fans? As a student of art though I couldn't help but notice the shoddy paint job which in my opinion had the opposite effect. I still admired the computer though. I would know nothing about them if my boyfriend hadn't insisted on building me one when we first got together. He bought all the parts I needed (with some help from my dad after telling him his plan and getting him excited about the idea) and showed me how to 'build' a computer. I would love to say that I helped put it together but in truth, the inside of a computer is a scary place, with lots of tiny bolts and wires and terrifying-looking plugs. I was too terrified to touch anything as I am extremely clumsy and accident-prone and did not want to risk damaging any of his hard work. I happily stood behind him and watched the entire process in awe. The only thing I knew about gaming

computers was that my brother had ordered an extremely fancy one from a very official-looking site that sold them in complete sets. I was told by my boyfriend that this is not what 'Hardcore Gamers' do though. To a gamer his/her computer is an extension of themselves and one of their greatest points of pride. I've witnessed this when showing people my computer, I say "look at this" while pointing at all the pretty rainbow lights dancing through my glass-walled computer case. I've been met with multiple "ooohs" and "aahs" (admittedly I don't know what it is that impresses them but I feel validation in showing it off regardless.) While watching Tim's Frankenstein heave itself to life, he animatedly regaled me with tales of this world he had put together saying it was the best one he has ever assembled. When it was on and he was logged in he started his tour

"This is the castle I built for myself," he explained as we watched his blocky avatar's point of view manoeuvre through the environment.

"This is the rail line I built to get to all of my farms."

"Oh! I've got to show you this!" He ejects excitedly.

"I bet you didn't know you could do this." He says with a smug smile.

It takes him a few minutes to get his avatar positioned and then he gets into a minecart and starts to go down the rail line.

"It's a very big world so it might take a few minutes to get there but it's worth it," explains Tim. I watch as his avatar continues his journey, noticing the landscape around it I think to myself that he hasn't done much with the naturally spawned terrain. Firstly he didn't pick the most aesthetic biome to situate himself and on top of that, it doesn't look like Tim is the type of Minecraft player that has heard of terraforming. Besides that, I am impressed with what he has going on. The builds aren't very realistic but they are big and there are a lot of them, it's a testament to the hours he has poured into this world.

"Taa Daa!" Tim exclaims proudly as his avatar reaches its intended destination.

"Look isn't it cool?"

I'm quiet as I examine the scene in front of me, this is because I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be looking at, it looks like a villager trading hall to me.

"See," he says, "you can lock your villagers in a place like this to make trading with them easier."

"Yeaah," I say while my brain tries to catch up and inform me of what has just happened.

Does he think this is new information? Does he think I'm a noob? Did we not just spend the better part of an hour talking about the complexities of this damn game together? Then it hits me, his subtle over-explanation of the aspects of the game that are of interest to him. Has he been mansplaining the game, I'm basing my entire master's degree on, to me this whole time? I'm torn because on one hand I admired his excitement around the subject and the passion he had for his world, but I'm also really frustrated and angry at his subliminal messaging.

*Noob: A Newbie, a person or player that is new to a game and generally is not well versed in the mechanics of that particular game and cannot play it proficiently yet. These people are generally easy to spot for an experienced player and are often targets. E.g. "Let's go pawn some noobs boys!" - A term often said by a group of male players in a team looking for easy targets in FPS games to get their kill count up with minimal effort.

Appendix B: Warzone Part 1

“Babe, I'm going to download a game onto your computer that I want to play later. Is that okay?” My boyfriend shouts from the other room while I'm crocheting from the warmth and comfort of my bed.

“Sure!” I shout back, even though the other room isn't very far away I just know that if he isn't actively listening to my reply he won't hear it and will start shouting back at me again and that might cause me to miss more of the show I'm currently watching while my fingers do the work. A few hours have passed and I'm still in the same spot wrestling with a crochet sculpture, forcing it to become something recognizable. I hear more shouting coming from the study but at first, I'm unsure if it's directed at me or not. Sometimes my boyfriend chats with his mate on discord while they play ranked PVP(player vs player) in WOW (World of Warcraft) together, however, for some unknown reason the volume is always raised. I think it's the adrenaline rush that comes from absolutely annihilating the enemy team or being annihilated. As I'm listening it becomes clear that it is not directed at me and that he must be playing a game but his tone and choice of speech don't fit his usual WOW pattern. My interest is peaked I sneak into the other room to peer over his shoulder at the new game he has downloaded. I see a familiar perspective that reminds me of days gone by when I was sitting on the couch of my neighbour as he garbled on about guns and the mechanics of war as I struggled with a PlayStation controller trying to get the stupid gun on the screen to stay steady so that I could try to get a shot off at him before he gets another kill on me. A reminiscent perspective that reminds me of boys and youth. It was the perspective of a first-person shooter game like the one I used to play with a boy named Dylan who lived across the street from me in my childhood home. The unmistakable perspective of a Call of Duty game. It is a first-person shooter game that allows you to see through the eyes of the avatar as if you were on the battlefield hunting for enemies. I have never played one on the computer before and I could never get the hang of the gun controls on a PlayStation controller but seeing my boyfriend play on a mouse and keyboard has me curious. After he is done with the game I ask him what it is about and if he thinks I would enjoy it, he shrugs nonchalantly, “Maybe, but it's very difficult, not many girls enjoy it.” Hmmm, this rubs me the wrong way as even though I know he doesn't mean it in a sexist way I can't help but be offended. I am unsure if he is saying this because he has taken my character into account or written me off as a player of this game based on my gender. It looked like he was having fun, the mechanics don't look too complicated and the premise seems simple enough that even I, a mere female, could grasp it. I let our encounter around this game roll around my subconscious for a few days before I decide how to respond.

Appendix C: Warzone Part 2

After further investigation into this game I quote, “not many girls play.” My defiant nature and disregard for patriarchal social norms got the better of me and I sat at my desk and fired up the game. It is called Call of Duty Modern Warfare but we've taken to calling it Warzone on account of how before every game there is a gruff British voice that says, “Welcome to the Warzone”. The basic premise of the game depending on which mode you decide to play it in is that you work in teams of 4 to plunder as much loot as you can while simultaneously trying to get the highest number of enemy kills. The goal is to get your team to 1 million dollars looted before any other teams. The number of players is around 100 all divided into teams of four or fewer. While playing and progressing through the game you can level up your weapons to add upgrades to them to make them better or to unlock new more powerful weapons. These weapons are all modelled after real-life weapons that I assume one would come across in a real war scenario. You can create unique individual specs for your character from a list of pre-existing options (some of which have to be unlocked through gameplay) to suit your style of play.

I nervously sat staring at the Warzone loading screen for the first time anxious about what I might encounter and curious as to why this game was considered difficult to those belonging to my gender. While waiting for it to load my boyfriend looks over and remarks with surprise, “You're going to play Warzone!”

“Yes,” I say sure of myself. “I want to see what it is about.”

He rolls his office chair over to mine so he can sit and spectate from behind me.

“I'll tell you what to do so that you can get the hang of it quicker.”

This form of help is something I struggle a lot with internally because on the one hand I'm grateful for the advice of someone better versed at the game than me but on occasion, his unsolicited advice has been the cause of arguments around play style. This is especially true when I am trying to figure something out for myself within a game in the hopes that if I can figure it out by myself I might have a better grasp of mechanics and might become a better player through my accomplishment. However, knowing him and how devoid of malice he is I know that everything he does is to help me because he genuinely cares about my experience and doesn't want me to be frustrated with the difficult nuance of some games. I appreciate his advice when I ask for it or when it is unquestionably needed but sometimes when he offers it without me willing to be ready to receive it, it feels like mansplaining and my feminist brain goes off about the politics around this form of explanation.

However, in this instance, I was nervous about the game (although unwilling to admit I was playing it to make a point). My screen loads up and I am in a practice area and a female military captain NPC (Noice) is explaining the controls to me as I follow along and reach certain markers. In the background, I have my boyfriend adding bits of extra information about tips and tricks that he does when it comes to certain mechanics. After the tutorial, it is time to play my first plunder match. My character loads in and is standing next to other characters I do not recognize.

“Who are these people?” I ask.

“Your teammates.” Boyfriend responds.

Oh duh, it did tell me there were other people I would play with. I'm still not 100% sure if these are AI players or the real deal like me sitting behind a computer screen sweating with nervous unsurety. Then I hear something I did not expect and it terrifies me. Afrikaans.

“Boyfriend!” I yell in panic. “What's happening?”

“Who are they?” “Why can I hear them?” “Can they hear me?”

My boyfriend laughs as he lifts my headphones off my head to listen.

“Those are the guys on your team talking to each other using the in-game chat feature.” He calmly explains.

“They shouldn't be able to hear you unless you enable chat.” He explains as he fiddles around with the settings of the game looking for something specific.

“No look here, you have it on push to talk.” He gestures to the setting on the screen.

“They can only hear you if you push this button on your mouse.” More gesturing towards the specific button. Oh okay, no need to panic Tayla you are ok, pull yourself together woman! The scariest part of the game hasn't even started yet.

I'm in, and I'm lost. My character seems to have jumped out of a plane, parachuted down to an island and now is standing idly amidst some trees.

“Go Go Go!” Screams Boyfriend excitedly. “Try to shoot someone!”

Oh alrighty, I start to move my character around in search of a target. Ooh, what's that?

Someone has managed to land their character in front of mine unsuspectingly and has not checked if anyone is behind them. *This is my chance* I thought as I raised my weapon, aiming for the head. *BANG!* The word HEADSHOT, in giant yellow letters, floats on my screen as my opponent's body slumps to the ground.

“I did it, Boyfriend!” I say with delight.

“Well done!” he says “Now go stand on his face and crouch.”

Weird but ok, I do as I am told and position my character accordingly.

“Why did I do that?” I ask.

“To show him that you are better than him,” explains Boyfriend.

“You T-bagged him.”

Oh!

I had T-bagged my first opponent, it seems gross and childish but on the other hand, it felt so right. I did it I'm a gamer!

*Noice: is gamer slang for the word nice.

* T-bagging: ‘Tea bagging’ is a taunt used in multiplayer games often FPS (first-person shooter) games where a winning opponent stands over the losing opponent's dead body and repeatedly crouches their character over the face of the corpse. It is intended to mimic a sexual gesture wherein the winner is dunking his testicles in the mouth of the loser as a sign of dominance.

Appendix D: Warzone Part 3

“On the roof Beangaurd! He has an RPG!” I scream into my mic as I try to warn my teammate about a potentially deadly situation occurring behind him in the game we refer to as Warzone. It has been quite some time since my first time playing and my boyfriend and I, along with the two other guys we are friends with on the property have formed a group for plunder that we play together frequently. My understanding of the game has deepened immensely and I am now slowly becoming obsessed with becoming a better FSP player. I have even set some goals within the game to monitor my progress.

1. Raise my kill count per game (it’s not good enough to only get 3 enemy kills per 30 min match)
2. Work towards unlocking a specific gun that I want. To do that I have to equip a gun I already have unlocked, with a ‘Ranger Foregrip’ and a ‘Solezero Mini Optic Sight’ and kill a certain number of people in a specific number of matches consecutively.
3. Stop dying so much. This involves better scoping out my surroundings and being more aware of the enemies surrounding me to not die so often.

Our communication as a team has improved a lot as well since we first started playing together. It took me a while to learn all the war lingo and gun stuff but now I can mostly follow a conversation and take instructions from my teammates without slowing our progress down with questions. It feels good to have a group of friends to play a game we love and have fun in together. Also playing against other people in real time lends itself to many unexpected and hilarious moments. We play so often together now that we even have a discord chat as well as a WhatsApp group to set up gaming times. The other day when the other girlfriends on the property were away the boys decided to get together with beers to discuss the new map/ update Warzone was getting at the end of the week. I went along as it's not like I am not interested in the conversation and I also like beer. When I questioned the one guy's use of the term ‘The boys’ he said without missing a beat or hesitating, “You play Warzone with us, you count as one of the boys.” This gave me mixed feelings as I know he meant that it pertains specifically to when we game, but that in itself caused me to question why this specific moniker was used and so widely accepted. We know women also game and that like some men can be very good at it. So why specifically use this term? The other half of me felt validated though like I had made it into some exclusive club. I was vindicated in my identity as a gamer and recognised as a peer on the same level as my gaming buddies. I felt proud like I had made it. The thing I had to question about this pride though was that I knew I was alone in this club as a woman because I was the only one of the girlfriends that actually played games and so this induction into the club was in specific reference to them not being allowed in simply based on the hobby they did not share with the rest of us. Weird how something so trivial seeming like a shared hobby could contain so many gender politics. I know this is a thought process only I was having due to the nature of my Thesis research. I do feel it important to document these happenings as all of these experiences culminate into my experience as a female gamer and even further manifest themselves into the aspects of my identity.

Appendix E: Warzone Part 4

My boyfriend and I decided to play some Warzone one evening as a way to unwind after a long day of academics for both of us. Our usual partners in crime were unavailable to join the team so we went in as a two-man with the expectation that we would be randomly assigned to a group with two other players we did not know. This can be a really fun experience or something I tend to find quite frustrating. It's always a mixed bag and you never know whom you are going to get as teammates. We have had experiences where we have been teamed up with children who do not respect our serious war tactics in-game and instead use the in-game talk feature as a way to spam the channel with their own voices and immature comments. This usually leads to us muting the chat option and just shouting at each other really loudly in order to hear each other over the game sounds coming through our earphones. On one occasion we were matched with two cool guys who had been friends for over 20 years and still played the game together when their private lives and as they put it 'wives' allowed them to do so. However, on this particular occasion that I am documenting, we were paired with an obnoxious young-sounding guy and his lackey whom he directed all of his offensive and abusive jokes towards.

As a bit of a preface to the situation that is about to be described, the gamer tag you are assigned is the name you are registered with on Battlenet. Battlenet is an application where you can download games, chat with your friends and even see which of your friends are online and what games they are playing. You are also able to invite those online friends to join you in a game of your choice. Now when I set up my Battlenet gamer tag I was still a PC gaming novice and was not sure whom I identified as a gamer yet. It gives you the option of writing your own gamer tag or you can cycle through a random assortment of words that it puts together for you to choose one. Not having played too many games on PC before I chose the latter option and settled on the first thing that I thought sounded cute and sort of accurate for me. This happened to be the moniker 'FizzyElf'. Normally this wouldn't be a problem or even stand out too much as there are a lot weirder and wilder-sounding gamer tags out there. However, in a particularly male-dominated game focussed on violence and ultimate displays of masculinity, this name does not blend too well into the background. As you can imagine it does not come across as very manly when compared to other tags seen within the game such as 'Warlord400' or 'MrWidowMaker'. I have even come across names such as 'Slashyslashykillkill' or 'Blooddog'. On this particular occasion, these other two random people assigned to our team after an unsatisfactory amount of time decided they were bored of our noncommunicative form of play. As I don't generally volunteer my voice for the chat unless I've deemed my other teammates cool (safe) enough, as it can be a source of harassment depending on the day. They decided they were tired of trying to play the game seriously like we seemed to be doing and started asking questions. I guess at some stage my boyfriend couldn't hear me over his earphones and I had relayed some important information to him over the in-game chat channel. My first mistake.

"Oooh which one of you is the girl?" asked the obnoxious teammate.

I just stayed quiet as he was trying to bait me.

"I'm guessing it's FizzyElf, that has to be a girl's name." he continued.

"Heeeey girly I'm talking to you!" he sang over the mic.

"I'm a woman actually." I couldn't help but respond. My second mistake.

"Do you even know how to play this game?" He asked smugly.

I wish I could say I was the better person here but he did not stop the whole game. Normally some players get bored of being what they think is humorous with this line of questioning and tend to focus on the game when they see I can in fact play the game and am doing so pretty

well. But I think it was around that time of night before some players log off and decide to mess around for their last few games. He just kept going on and on, he would follow my character and shoot me to try to give me a fright when I was focused on the enemy in front of me. He would also throw grenades and bombs in my direction as a way of giving my position away. Knowing full well that if I died it would count against him as we were on the same team. He would scream questions at me such as, “WHY ARE YOU CAMPING?” when I was sneaking around a building to ascertain my target's whereabouts. Despite all of this he also dedicated a good portion of his time to telling me how my chosen weapon was lame/ wrong/ weird/ weak and going on about which gun would be best for me as a girl to use. Nothing could stop his barrage of harassment. Nothing I said or protested was heard and when it came to my boyfriend defending me he just flat-out pretended that he couldn't hear what he was saying. Even his friend who was the usual target for his abuse tried to protest his behaviour at a stage to no avail. Even though my boyfriend and I had managed to get a fair number of boxes looted, money banked and opponents killed, the only thing we could do to free ourselves of this nuisance was to quit the match.

Unfortunately, similar experiences have happened to me when using the in-game voice chat and I'm not the only woman this has happened to. It just is weird to me that now when female gamers should be more widely recognised as existing it still comes as a shock to some people. Consequently, then our gameplay gets ruined based on who we are not because of how we play.