

## **The female game player revisited:**

An exploratory study on female game journalists and their constructed identity as female game players



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## Abstract

This research aimed to explore how female game journalists construct their identity as female gamers through an Actor-Network (ANT) approach. By gaining an understanding of the processes involved in identity construction, as well as the influences of technology on personal identity development, the following main research question was explored: *“How do female game journalists construct their identity as female gamers?”*.

The research method consisted of a mixed qualitative methods analysis technique. Firstly, in-depth interviews were conducted with female game journalists within the Netherlands to gain an understanding in how they construct their identity as female gamers. Secondly, online articles written by the same female game journalists were also analyzed for exploring constructed identity online. Both methods were combined and processed through thematic analysis.

The main findings in these research stated that discrimination is still ongoing within the gaming industry towards females. Hereby, female gamers as well as female game journalists have experienced stereotyping and social exclusion from male gamers and/or male peers within the gaming industry. However, an increase in acceptance towards female gamers and female gaming professionals was also expected and/or already sensed by the interviewees. Moreover, in-game storylines were indicated as impacting sense of personal morale as well as empathy towards in-game characters.

Additionally, sociality through gaming enabled interviewees to explore their identity both inside groups, such as clans or guilds, as well as outside groups with strangers through MMOs and/or family and friends. These results overlapped with the explored online constructed identity from the interviewees as well. However, online interviewees voiced female gamer related topics in lesser extents compared to the interviews as a result of company restrictions in topics for articles.

Ultimately, all interviewees indicated gaming as part of their everyday lives. They implemented all aspects of gaming into their daily routines and engage their personal environment with their interest in gaming as well. However, as female gamer identity construction has not been widely covered in female gamer studies, more attention is needed towards how identity construction emerges and how it is situated within relationships amongst human and nonhuman actors.

*Key words: gendered technologies, actor-network, ANT, identity, feminism, gaming, discrimination, social exclusion, female gamers, female game journalists*

# Chapter 1. Introduction

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How people perceive themselves in daily life, how they interact with others and how they express themselves is all part of their experienced identity construction. In game studies, these constructed identities are explored by focusing on how game players view themselves, present themselves towards the rest of the world and how their identities are co-constructed by others as well. (Taylor, 2008; Shaw, 2011). Female game players, however, have not always been considered important actors within gaming cultures, as, in an environment where male game players are prominently visible, female game players have been “sidelined far too often within industry and research communities” (Taylor, 2008, p. 54). Additionally, how females identify themselves as gamers has not been researched extensively: “there has been little research on girl gamers and identity outside of a gameplay context” (Storla, 2011, p. 1). Although previous researches on game players and expressed identities did include both sexes, the perceptions from female game players could have been less prominent due to the male dominated voices in the overall researches into game players. This could have led researchers towards emphasizing on gendered identity constructions. Reijmersdal, Jansz, Peters and van Noort (2013) note that “large-scale surveys investigating playing habits continuously affirm that the gaming population is dominated by boys and young men” (Reijmersdal, Jansz, Peters & van Noort, 2013, p. 2640). Moreover, previous researches have shown that female game players still play games less frequent and in shorter sessions compared to male game players, which can be an important factor for determining that male game players make up for the larger part of the overall game players’ communities (Chen, 2010; Homer, Hayward, Frye & Plass, 2012; Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010, in Reijmersdal et al., 2013). Hence, researching female gamers specifically could provide more understanding in how gamer identities emerge and are situated within gaming communities. Moreover, it could generate a thorough understanding into how gaming is implemented within the daily lives of female gamers and how it can help co-create their explored identities as gamers.

In understanding female gamer identity constructions and how games are established within the life of female gamers, the relationship between technology, culture and society should be taken into account through the notion of the “social shaping”

approach, where video/digital games are seen as “broadly continuous with other forms of media technologies and their consumption in everyday life” (Giddings, 2007, p. 116). They “view the forms and practices of this consumption (and hence the uses to which media technologies are put) as shaped by social agency” (Giddings, 2007, p. 116). The social aspect in this agency with gameplay stems from how games play a significant part in female game players’ identity construction. This is in line with the Actor-Network approach, which aims to create an understanding into the processes that involve the human/non-human relationships – that occur between game players and avatars for example (Law, 2008).

Involved with the process of shaping identity, avatars as actors can also play a role in how females identify themselves as game players. Mazalek et al. (2009) state: “virtual avatars can become important projection planes for a player’s agency in the game world and are often seen as dramatic connections to a game world” (Mazalek et al., 2009, p. 161). In other words, avatars become that element in a game that represents the game player. Ganesh et al. (2011) explain that “through their avatar, an online animated character that represents the self, gamers establish friendships, develop new social skills, and express their individuality” (Ganesh, van Schie, de Lange, Thompson & Wigboldus, 2011, p. 1577). However, how well game players engage with avatars, or in-game characters, as well as experienced immersion with them has not been explored extensively, leading to a “growing concern that identifying with game avatars may influence the development of self-concept and identity (Klimmt, Hefner, Vorderer, Roth, & Blake, 2010, in Li, Liao & Khoo, 2012, p. 257). Moreover, exploring female game players’ identification with game characters/avatars can provide with insights into how female game players prefer certain game characters/avatars (e.g. appearance choices) and how they can identify with them (e.g. personality) for example.

Although there are studies that have previously focused on self-identification of game players with avatars or (Yee, 2006; Gidding, 2007), this has not done as much from an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) perspective. By not only attempting to draw an overall picture of the “network” of all elements that come together in gameplay, an explorative view on technology/human interactions can be constructed (Taylor, 2009). These explored interactions can be used to determine agents from the “network” that surrounds the process of identity construction by female game players.

Exploring who female game players are and “what it takes to inhabit gaming culture” remains an underexplored area in most researches according to Taylor (2008): “rather than turning our attention in earnest to current women gamers – a group that seems to be “making” it – and ever-illusory category of “girls who don’t like computers” is regularly chased after” (Taylor, 2008, p. 54). These women, those who make a profession within the gaming industry, also are part of the gaming culture and more importantly, also have not received much attention in research either. Female game journalists, for example, being female “experts” within the industry, might also have to deal with gendered identity construction. Their publicness could impact how they define themselves as female game players and how this could be different in how they present themselves towards the rest of the gaming communities.

Moreover, a lack of female gaming professionals within the industry raises the question whether their participation is appreciated as well as with their male peers and whether discrimination plays an important role in that (Fullerton, Fron, Pearce & Morie, 2008). Moreover, Fullerton et al. (2008) identify factors that illustrate the large disparity of female professionals within the field, which are identified as the following: “extreme working conditions and poor quality of life; a misconception that girls don’t play games; the industry practice of making games that makers (most of whom are men) like to play; an unfriendly workplace environment and “garage hacker” culture; and alienating business practices, such as “booth babes” at trade shows” (Fullerton et al., 2008, p. 139).

Hence, by focusing on female game players and/or female gaming professionals solely, a more in-depth and rich research can be established to explore how gamer identities are constructed and, especially, how female game players construct their identity within a male dominated environment. This can shift the assumed perception of stereotyped or known identities of female game players. Thus, an in-depth research can be performed into why they present themselves as gamers and how this is constructed in a particular way.

This research attempts to explore how female game journalists construct their identity within the network. From an Actor-Network perspective, this research will include elements such as gendered identity constructions by the community and perceived influences of avatars on their identity presentation towards the community.

Essentially, these elements are perceived as anything that could influence the identity construction process. Based on this notion, the following main research question and sub-question were developed to lead this research:

Main research Question: *How do female game journalists construct their identity as female gamers?*

Sub-question 1: *How do female game journalists construct their identity as female gamers through online articles?*

Sub-question 2: *How can technology influence female game journalists' identity construction as female gamers?*

For this research, a desk research was conducted to gain an insight into previous studies: what it means to construct identity, how identity is performed in digital environments, female game players' role in the gaming culture, identity construction supported by avatars and the role of Actor-Network approach in gaming and identity. Based on this literature review, a mixed qualitative research method was conducted. The methods that were used for this research were in-depth interviews with female game journalists and document analysis of online written articles by the same female game journalists. Then, the conclusions to this research have been covered and applied into a discussion along with the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.



# Chapter 2. Literature review

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## 2.1 Constructing identity

Identity performance and shaping takes place within people's construction of giving meaning to everything they do and say in their daily lives: on the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time" (Buckingham, 2008, p. 1). This notion of identity suggests that identity can be seen as those aspects that can distinct people from one another. On the other hand, as identity can be interpreted in several ways, it can also be taken from a grouped perspective; identity, according to Buckingham (2008) can also refer to "a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind" (Buckingham, 2008, p.1).

Soenens and Van Steenkiste (2011), state that one's identity and the self are separate terms that can become congruent based on " (a) the motives underlying one's identity commitments (i.e., pressure versus volition) and (b) the content of the goals defining one's identity (i.e., extrinsic versus intrinsic)" (Soenens & Van Steenkiste, 2011, p. 1). Constructing identity as a result to this congruence can be measured through the identity's "pragmatic value", meaning its usefulness in "enabling people to overcome life challenges; "scholars advocating the construction perspective deny the existence of a true self" (Soenens & Van Steenkiste, 2011, p. 2). This reflects back on the Actor-Network (ANT) approach, where actors are all part of an overall network within which they are interrelated. Law (2009) defines ANT as: "material-semiotic tools, sensibilities, and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located" (Law, 2009, p. 141). Through ANT, relationships between humans and non-humans are explored, whereby attention is given to technological impacts on identity construction as well (Lagesen, 2012; Law, 2009).

Griffiths, Davies and Chappell (2003) state: "there have been a few psychologically-based studies on personality and computer game play" (Griffiths et al., 2003, p. 81). As Griffiths et al. state, computer game play can influence personality, which can also influence identity in general as well. Due to this lack of attention into the influences from

technology and particularly gaming on identity construction, the effects of technology on identity remains underestimated (Beavis and Charles, 2007).

Brad (2013) adds: “actor network theorists proposed treating artifacts as having agency: these nonhuman actors may resist enrollment into our technological projects; furthermore we may delegate to nonhuman actors moral as well as material roles, inscribed into their design”. Hereby, from an actor-network perspective, technological impacts from artifacts, such as games and consoles, should be taken into account for understanding identity construction of gamers.

### **2.1.1. Gendered identities through technology**

Perceived identities of female gamers within gaming communities are notably gendered and require an understanding of how they emerge (Lagesen, 2012). Through an ANT approach, these gendered identities can be explored by taking technological influences on identity construction into consideration (Lagesen, 2012). Beavis and Charles (2007) note that “constructions of gendered identity are central to the ways in which girls’ engagement with technology, their situatedness within both physical and social contexts, and the effect of intersections between these things are understood (Beavis & Charles, 2007, p. 693). According to Lagesen (2012), from an ANT perspective, identity can emerge and interact by and with both humans and non-humans; however, the influence of technologies is underrated: “there is a lack of concern with the way gender is constructed and the roles technology can play in its construction and production” (Lagesen, 2012, p. 444). Lagesen emphasizes that gender should not be seen as a static concept, but rather as a fluid ongoing process from an ANT point of view: “leaning on ANT, we may claim that doing gender is an on-going movement where associations with bodies, norms, knowledge, interpretations, identities, technologies, and so on, are made and unmade in complex ways” (Lagesen, 2012, p. 444). From this point of view, gender should not be treated as something that is unchangeable. However, the problem according to Lagesen (2012) is that gender has always continuously been treated as stable and thus being black-boxed (Lagesen, 2012). Additionally, Bray (2013) states that “men are viewed as having a natural affinity with technology, whereas women supposedly fear or dislike it”, and Wajcman

(2009) adds: “the taken-for-granted association of men and machines is the result of the historical and cultural construction of gender” (Bray, 2013, p. 43; Wajcman, 2009, p. 144). Both Bray (2013) and Wajcman (2009) stress that associations with technology are especially based on gender and, as Wajcman points out, has resulted into this due to historical and cultural constructions (Bray, 2013; Wajcman, 2009). This exemplifies how blackboxing both enables and constraints gender associations with technology, where with female gamers this could influence people’s associations of them and technology. Especially within the video game industry, that type of conflict “has resulted in a certain perception of male predilection toward technology and male hegemony within certain technology spheres” (Fisher, 2012, p. 30).

### **2.1.2 Feminism studies on technology**

Exploring the relationships of women and technologies had feminist studies to focus on gendered identities within technology as well as where those identity associations originated from (.According to Wajcman (2009): “recognizing the complexity of the relationship between women and technology, by the 1980s feminists were exploring the gendered character of technology itself” (Wajcman, 2009, p. 4). Where traditional feminism, also referred to as radical feminism, has always focused on women’s bodies and sexuality, a different form of feminism emerged: social feminism (Wajcman, 2009). Social feminism aims to explore the relationships between women’s work and technology as well as their embedded gender associations with them (Wajcman, 2009).

### **2.1.3 Digital identity construction**

In digital environments, identity construction takes place in a more controlled context, as actors within these environments can influence how they will perform their preferred identity (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). Boyd (2001) explains: “depending on one’s personality, an individual will adjust aspects of their presentation according to the reactions and presentations of those around them” (Boyd, 2001, p. 20). This could impact how people construct identity, as Boyd (2001) states that external factors can influence how people shape identity, and in return, are shaped within their networks as well (Boyd, 2001). Gonzales and Hancock (2008) support this notion and state: “a key factor in

determining self-construction is the public nature of the self-presentation. Several studies suggest that one's awareness of an audience, or sense of "publicness," augments the effect of self-presentation on identity" (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008, p. 168). Awareness of digital environments within which identity is constructed can thus influence how people choose to construct that identity and portray it to other actors within those environments. Hence, by taking into account how other individuals within a certain digital environment participate, people's publicness can influence how they will present their identity, also known as self-monitoring (Boyd, 2001).

How identity construction within digital environments can similarly shape people's personal identity construction remains an unsolved question, according to Gonzales and Hancock (2008): "with the rise of computer-mediated forms of self-presentation, an important question to consider is whether mediated self-presentations can similarly shape our identities" (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008, p. 168). Kelly and Rodriguez (2006), however, voice the possibility of digital identities as influencing personal identity: "this process whereby people incorporate aspects of their self-presentations into their own identities is often referred to as internalization, which typically has been operationalized as a shift in private self-beliefs and/or behaviors to match the self-presentations" (Kelly & Rodriguez, 2006, p. 185). Moreover, when actors want to identify themselves with their audiences and want to be identified with by them as well, they will feel accountable to those they cater for online through their representations which, in turn, can lead for the actors to become more like their online presented identities (Kelly & Rodriguez, 2006).

#### **2.1.4 Identity within groups**

Being part of any group, or acting within a group can also in itself co-construct one's identity. Although this can be referred to as group identity, an individual's own identity, which is unique to its group with which he or she associates him or herself with, should not be forgotten nonetheless (Buckingham, 2008). How individuals associate themselves as members from a particular group and feel belongingness within a certain "community" can influence the way they refer back to themselves as individuals and, more generally, their own perceived identity (Buckingham, 2008, p. 5).

Hereby, “social identity should be seen not so much as a fixed possession, but as a social process, in which the individual and the social are inextricably related” (Buckingham, 2008, p. 6). The interrelatedness of the individual and the social relate back to “classification”, how people classify themselves or/against others (Jenkins, 2000, p. 8). Identification can be determined as “the specification of what things are and what are not” and looks at the differences between the self and the other (Jenkins, 2008, p. 8).

Being part of a group can influence people’s individual identity and enable a sense of depersonalization. Levine, Cassidy and Jentsch (2010) explain this through the SIDE model, known as the social identity model of deindividuation effects, which suggests that “the effects of anonymity in the group, rather than making people less self-aware and less socially aware, actually has the effect of depersonalizing them” (Levine et al., 2010, p. 786). Once a person becomes a member of a group, he/she might become more immersed with the group identity during that membership and experience a decay of his/her own individuality within the group. Levine et al. (2010) explain that “when social identities are salient, and deindividuation conditions pertain, people act in terms of the norms and values of their social category memberships” (Levine et al., 2010, p. 787). If this occurs, group identity can overshadow personal identity, leading to individual’s identity to be implicit and hidden within the explicit group identity.

Through the SIDE model, people’s identity construction can be analyzed and understood within the context of group identities. Moreover, it suggests people’s willingness to shift identity traits to fit within the larger group (Levine et al., 2010). Hence, through the need of belongingness, individuals might adapt their own identity to ensure its fit within a general group identity. In the gaming community, female gamers might put personal identity traits in the background if it were not to have a fit within the gaming community to which they might want to belong to. According to Fisher (2012), “this push/pull of men and women within disputed spaces is part of a larger picture in which one group gains a position within a ruling class and then works to maintain that position by promoting ruling-class ideas” as embedded within male hegemony in video game journalism and participation online (Fisher, 2012, p. 32). Due to the already established and experienced ascendancy of male journalists and gamers within online environments, for female game journalists (and female gamers in general) this could result into them to

mold their constructed identities online into acceptable standards for the overall dominant male audiences in video gaming communities.

## **2.2 Sociality through gaming**

Digital gaming has provided game players with new ways to meet players and socialize with them (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008). MMO games in particular can provide digital leisure spaces for game players, as according to Hussain and Griffiths (2008), MMOs “have evolved out of the textbased multiuser domains (MUDs) and they have utilized the Internet as a new gaming forum that allows people to link up and play together” (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008, p. 47). MMOs provide a different way of communication for game players and can allow them to use these games for social purposes. Cole and Griffiths (2007) add: “despite the massive amounts of money spent on online gaming, very little research has been carried out regarding the positive social aspects of these games” (Cole & Griffiths, 2007, p. 575). Domahidi, Festl and Quandt (2014) add: “when people share leisure time activities, they build and maintain social relationships such as friendships” (Domahidi et al., 2014, p. 108). Hence, the possibilities in establishing meaningful social relationships from these games require more attention as they can be viewed as part of personal identity construction from an ANT perspective: “by seeing videogames as the autonomous actants to which players establish alterity relations, we can make clearer accounts of how identity performance arises from a complex and symmetric relation between humans and non-humans” (Silva, 2013, p. 17).

### **2.2.1 Clans and guilds**

In digital game environments, clans and/or guilds can be an example of how a sense of belongingness to a group can also strengthen the will to become part of an overall group identity, and ultimately perform better than other groups during gameplay. Online gaming clans can be defined as “self-emerging, self-organizing communities of online game players” (Lin, Sun & Tinn, 2003, p. 388). Guilds are similarly defined by de Larios and Lang (2003) as a: “formal system long-term organized groups within a game”, whereas Nardi and Harris (2006) describe them as “named groups which socialize and game together” (de Larios & Lang, 2003, p. 107; Nardi & Harris, 2006, p. 150).

Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs), for example, provide platforms on which clans and guilds can be formed. MMOs are online games that create social spaces which are “unique in the fact that they collect and mix people pursuing goals in three-dimensional space” (Williams et al., 2006, p. 339). Moreover, “by joining groups of players”, gamers “are able to circumvent the restrictions imposed by game design, and to add a new layer of engagement with both the game in itself and with other players as well” (Silva, 2013, p. 43). Through these games people can interact, express their individual identities, be part of a group and a group identity and play/work together throughout the game.

Competitiveness with other groups can empower the sense of belongingness of individuals to their groups and influence them in adopting his/her own identity as part of the main group identity (Lee, 2007). For example, in a “simple game mechanic such as capture the flag”, two groups are automatically battling against each other and “will impact those groups’ social behaviour” (Williams et al., 2006, p. 340). Lee (2007) states that “according to social comparison theory, typical group members “want to be different from as well as better than other people” (Lee, 2007, p. 385). The interactions during gameplay and having to battle together against opponents can strengthen belongingness of individuals to a group, which can also lead to individual identity construction to be influenced (Williams et al., 2006). Devos and Banaji (2003) support this notion and explain, through self-categorization theory, that “under particular conditions, group members perceive themselves as exemplars of the group rather than as unique individuals” (Devos & Banaji, 2003, 180).

### **2.3 Video game journalists and perceived identity roles**

Video game journalists are mediators of knowledge and values of games (Carlson, 2009). Moreover, they “help to blur clear lines between producers and consumers, a product of their history as video game fans and their relationships with game developers, yet they simultaneously work to secure those lines as fixed (Carlson, 2009, para. 1.4). They have to satisfy both sides as “the job of a game journalist consists in many ways of balancing acts between a perceived loyalty to the reading public and a dependency on industry material” (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009, p. 1). A part of their identity can be placed within this

mediation and showing their expertise, whether is through working independently or as an employee of a game-related news company (Carlson, 2009). However, that expertise may not be widely accepted within its definition, as video game journalists are often placed within the notion of the “enthusiast press”, which “produces consumer-oriented publications that focus on publicizing specific categories of goods, often high-end technological products (such as video games, computers, or cars)” (Carlson, 2009, para. 4.1). For video game journalists, this “label carries the connotation that those video game journalists who belong to the enthusiast press are not “real” journalists”, which generates discussion for disagreement amongst many (Carlson, 2009, para. 4.1) This labelling emerged, however, from the notion that games-related journalism stems from video game fandom websites, rather than the traditionally known “respectable” publications (Carlson, 2009, para. 4.3).

Video game journalists are game workers in general, which marks the professional side to their identity within gaming. Game workers are those who have a profession within the gaming industry and work within game-related environments (Wimmer & Sitnikova, 2011). According to Deuze, Martin and Allen (2007), “game work takes place within a rather gendered, producer-consumer collaborative and counter-cultural legacy as well as a corporate, commercial and technology-driven contemporary context” (Deuze et al., 2007, p. 337). However, “the exact roles of many workers in the development of games remain largely undefined as any representation of game workers outside the industry is veiled by either complete invisibility or glamorized portrayal” (Deuze et al., 2007, p. 337).

Female game journalists can experience invisibility for example, as they have to perform within a gendered environment, but at the same time also have to work on constructing their own identity (Deuze et al., 2007). According to Gonzales and Hancock (2008), “a key factor in determining self-construction is the public nature of the self-presentation (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008, p. 168). However, also the extent to “one’s awareness of an audience, or sense of “publicness,” augments the effect of self-presentation on identity” (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008, p. 168).

Female professionals within the gaming industry may have to cope with stereotyping, both in the professional as well as in the gaming sense. Within the industry, for example, many people seem to have pre-established a “framing” that defines the identity of female gameworkers within their work as well as a gamer (Kafai, Heeter, Denner



& Sun, 2008). The problem, according to Kafai et al. (2008), is that “the industry continues to be dominated by men, and overall has been resistant to acknowledging the importance of gender” (Kafai et al., 2008, p. 8).

## **2.4 Female game players in a gendered gaming environment**

In an environment where male game players are prominently visible, “female game players have been sidelined far too often within industry and research communities” (Taylor, 2008, p. 54). Despite popular belief in research that males are more likely to enjoy playing games and pursue a career within the gaming industry, female game players are increasingly growing and playing a prominent part within the gaming culture (Taylor, 2008). As part of a Identity construction for female game players can then be particularly important in gaining understanding the contexts within which their identities are placed. However, due to a seemingly pre-constructed notion of a “typical female gamer” established within the gaming culture, it can be difficult for female game players to construct their own identity fully within the environments where the gaming culture takes place (Taylor, 2008).

Buckingham (2008) explains that although identity can be constructed, a person cannot fully control the construction process as others can co-construct or define your identity for themselves differently: “who I am (or who I think I am) varies according to who I am with, the social situations in which I find myself, and the motivations I may have at the time, although I am by no means entirely free to choose how I am defined” (Buckingham, 2008, p.1). This implies that the identities of female gamers are part of relationship constructs within which these identities are performed and defined by all involved actors.

### **2.4.1 Dealing with social isolation**

Poels, De Cock and Malliet (2012) state: “although people are often aware of the presence of stereotyped gender expectations, the process of socialization can have a strong impact on their daily behavior, including their media use” (Poels, De Cock & Malliet, 2012, p. 634). The social environment in which people are situated can define their identity for them, resulting into group forming and social exclusion (Poels et al., 2012).

Female game players often deal with social isolation as a result to gendered identity construction, which can be discouraging them to come “out” and identify themselves as

“serious” game players towards everyone else in the community. Taylor (2008) supports this notion and states that this results into female gamers to occupy a kind of “closeted gamer identity” (Taylor, 2008, p. 54). The main problem is, according to Taylor (2008), that “the population of women that does play games is frequently seen as an anomaly rather than taken as a prime informant on how play works” (Taylor, 2008, p. 54). Yates and Littleton (2010) agree to this problem by stating that “women and girls are presented as being alienated from computer game culture”, resulting to little research focusing on their knowledge on gameplay and identity within the culture as well (Yates & Littleton, 2010, p. 567). Moreover, “many public game spaces are male-dominated and act to exclude female gamers and fuel the perception that playing digital games is a male preserve” (Kerr, 2003, p. 2).

#### **2.4.2 Stereotyping outside the gameplay**

Since the introduction of video games, certain images towards females have formed inside and outside the gameplay that generally have become widely accepted and resulted into consistent stereotyping (Hayes, 2005). According to Peck, Ketchum and Embrick (2011), “research has consistently shown that stereotypes have long-term consequences regarding how others are perceived and impose limits on intergroup interactions” (Peck et al., 2011, p. 212). Due to this, pre-established images of female gamers can influence identity creation outside of the female gamers’ self-constructed identity. Moreover, stereotypes can negatively impact perceptions towards female gamers and female gamers in general (Peck et al., 2011). According to Hayes (2005), stereotyping towards female gamers will not end if the root of the problem is not looked upon either, as she explains: “the continued stereotyping of female gamers may reinforce the appeal of gaming for men as a means of asserting and displaying masculinity, similar to certain sports” (Hayes, 2005, p. 24).

#### **2.4.3 Booth babes versus serious gamers**

Participating within gaming communities can be an obstacle for female gamers who want to participate actively in them as serious gamers and/or professional gamers (Fullerton et al., 2008). Taylor, Jenson and Castell (2009) state that: “male ‘ownership’ over both the production and mainstream consumption of digital play has been thoroughly

documented”, and due to that: “games largely continue to be made by and for males” (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 240). Despite that games are produced for males primarily, women are actually “the fastest-growing group of video and computer game consumers, making up an estimated 43% of players” (Fullerton et al., 2008, p. 137). However, despite a notable increase of female gamers in video gaming consumption, their participation within the gaming culture remains underestimated and ignored to date (Fullerton et al., 2008; Taylor, 2009).

Within the gaming communities, input from females often remains solely acceptable and appreciated when they appear at events as “booth babes” (Fullerton et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2009; Dill & Thill, 2007). Dill and Thill (2007) describe booth babes as “provocatively dressed, attractive women representing game characters who pose for pictures with male video game conferences attendees” (Dill & Thill, 2007, p. 853). Appearing as booth babes, however, is seen as an unappreciated job by female gamers in general and highly denigrating

## **2.5 Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and gaming**

Previous research into the history of computer games has perceived gaming as a system, incorporated with “rules, mechanics and deep structures” (Taylor, 2009, p. 331). Moreover, attempts have been made to understand games as a narrative structure including stories and characters as with cartoon series on television for example (Taylor, 2009). However, the Actor-Network theory (ANT) requires looking beyond structures and also includes the human/non-human relationships involved.

Understanding how the human/non-human relationship works requires understanding how the non-human actors can be influencers as well (Cypher & Richardson, 2006). At its very basic, the mediator between a game and a game player can be seen as the computer screen. The engagement level a screen has been able to deliver those watching it is notably less with watching television compared to playing a game and immerse with the screen: “while other forms of windowed perception have been primarily visual, the game experience sets up a different relationship with the screen, and a different experience of screen space as something with virtual depth to be entered, explored and traversed (Cypher & Richardson, 2006, p. 3). By taking the screen as the mediator between

human and game, including the involved technology, the relationship should not be taken for granted, which is one of the pitfalls of “black-boxing”, assuming that “complex machines like computers are mere tools, separate from and without influence when it comes to human activity” (Cypher & Richardson, 2006, p. 3). By thinking of the tools that enable the act of gaming by their practical use only, it can be difficult to interpret the human-technology relationship and hence the interactivity amongst these two actors.

### 2.5.1 ANT and the assemblage of gameplay

Assemblage can help understand all the involved actors within the act of gaming (e.g. players, game developing companies, in-game levels etc.), while also looking at the interrelationships these actors share amongst each other. Taylor (2009) states:

Games, and their play, are constituted by the interrelations between (to name just a few) technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of the game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of communities, our interior lives, personal histories, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our activity as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frames and tropes (Taylor, 2009, p. 332).

All these elements/actors are included to what defines a game and the act of playing it; however, there can be more actors involved. As the amount of actors can increase with the years, it can also be difficult to create a holistic image for the total amount of actors and interactivity level in the overall act of gaming. However, by focusing on a game as a living object, an understanding of interactivity and relationship can be determined between the technology and the game player (Taylor, 2009).

In exploring identity construction, these actors within the gaming network can help determine “how various players construct the act of gaming and how that process plays into their own particular sense of self, including their own specific gendered identity” (Yates & Littleton, 2001, in Royse et al., 2007, p. 558). Their perceived identity construction can thus be explained by how people interact with fellow game players within the industry, their preferred game types or digital media for example.

### 2.5.2 ANT and immersion with in-game characters/avatars

Avatars represent the game player during game play and can be seen as the primary moving element that progresses throughout a game which can be seen as an online version of the game player. Kim, Lee and Kang (2012) define avatars as “computer-generated images that represent users during online interactions” (Kim, Lee & Kang, 2012, p. 1664). In Yee and Bailenson (2009), avatars are described as a “perceptible digital representation whose behaviors reflect those executed, typically in real time, by a specific human being” (Bailenson & Blaskovich, 2004, in Yee & Bailenson, 2009, p. 285).

In MMOs and particularly MMORPGs, for example, players can modify character traits for their avatar with skills/abilities, change their avatar’s appearance to their preference, such as hair color, and at the same time socialize in that online space for example (Yee, 2006). Hussain and Griffiths (2008) add: “gamers can choose the gender, race, profession, and morality of their character” (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008, p. 47). Ganesh et al. (2011) explain that by enabling game players with the ability to modify avatars to their preferred standard, the identification process with those avatars explain for an experienced influence on a game player’s perceived identity (Ganesh et al., 2011). These specified options within MMO games can thus allow for stronger immersion and identification with in-game characters. Additionally, Hussain and Griffiths (2008) explain that the immersion occurs because MMOs “allow gamers to explore a range of identities by playing a character created by the player” (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008, p. 47).

In the game player-avatar relationship, it can be difficult, from an actor-network perspective, to define who controls whom and the point at which the actor’s influence can be measured (Cypher & Richardson, 2006). With especially MMOGs and MMORPGs, due to their adaptable nature, it can be questionable who the “controlling” actor is in the act of playing both game types; the games can be changed and adapt to game players preferences, whilst game players are conforming to some standardized rules in the games that can “steer” them in a certain direction during gameplay as an extent of progression (Cypher & Richardson, 2006). As a result of this shared relationship between game players and avatars, game players can experience an influence from the avatars on their identity and sociality through all processes and intermediary technological standards between them.

Yee (2006) mentions how game players navigate in the online gaming environment through the avatar, and an explanation of how the avatar can influence the game player as well through, for example, helping them gain social status in that online environment:

“Game players interact with the world through a combination of mouse-driven interfaces and typed commands, and partake of a large number of varied activities that increase in complexity, reward and time involvement which typically operate on a random-ratio reinforcement schedule. These activities revolve around character advancement and translate into a functional advantage in terms of the mechanics of the world, whether this is combat capability, social status, avatar appearance, geographic knowledge, equipment quality or even cooking skills” (Yee, 2006, p. 6).

### 2.5.3 Understanding game algorithm: Theory crafting

During gameplay, game players can engage in finding their own ways in navigating through a game by collecting certain data that can help them to progress. This notion is referred to as “theory crafting”, which is “used to refer to data analyses made by the players of massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) as an important means to understand and control the game and to improve their own gameplay” (Wenz, 2012, p. 179). Game players can co-create data analyses and work together on calculating the algorithm through which the progress in-game is decided. According to Williams et al. (2006), “every game features “mechanics”, which can be broadly thought of as the incentives of gameplay” (Williams et al., 2006, p. 340). They state that these features are part of how a game is set up and results of written code, which can be seen as the “blueprint” of a game and how it is set up in its rules for the gamers (e.g. restrictions) (Williams et al., 2006). Working through a game’s algorithm to understand how these mechanics work, can help gamers in their theorcrafting. Glas (2010) refers to this as a “hyperproductive demystification”, where “the algorithmic basis of games and the abstract rules hidden behind the visual representation of the game worlds are made visible in the way theorycrafters engage with the game” (Glas, 2010; Wenz, 2012, p. 180).

For some players, “conducting theorycrafting is considered as being involved with the game on the deepest, most intriguing level” (Karlsen 2011, p. 12). Identity construction can play a role in this matter; by working with the technology offered by the game and working together with other gamers, theorycrafting can play a part of how someone views himself/herself as a gamer.

Karlson (2011) states that “theorycrafting seems to serve as a bridge between two different aspects of game players’ identities: their gaming interests and a more general interest in technology” (Karlson, 2011, p. 13). It can partially be attributed to a game player’s identity as a result to experienced identity forming through technology (perceived non-human influences).

# 3. Research design

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## 3.1 Research objective

The main objective of this research is to explore how female game journalists construct their identity as female gamers. Being part of the gaming industry, it can be interesting to explore how these journalists view themselves as gamers and why it could matter within this particular industry to express and construct their identities. Moreover, how they write about their gaming experiences and how they can identify with avatars can also be explored for perceived influences by nonhumans on identity construction from an Actor-Network (ANT) approach. Hereby, it will be taken into account how these female game journalists present themselves as female game players through the type of games they play, avatar preference or what they write about in their work, for example.

## 3.2 Timeframe

The timeframe needed for data collection was expected to take place in at least six weeks and ultimately two months. Starting from the third week of March, 2014, up till the last week of April, 2014, in-depth interviews were conducted with female game journalists working for different Dutch game news websites. The transcriptions of the interviews were processed right after each interview. A document analysis of online game blog posts written by these female game journalists was performed in the first week of May, 2014. In the last three weeks of May, 2014, both of these methods (in-depth interviews and document analysis) were analyzed for results/conclusions separately and compared.

## 3.3 Units of analysis

The units of analysis in this research consist of individuals and artifacts. The individuals in this study are female game journalists and were chosen based on the criterion that they write news articles/reviews or personal blog posts on games for any Dutch game news website. Moreover, it was preferred that they live in the Netherlands, ensuring interviews to be planned without time zone/distance constraints.



Other criteria such as cultural, religious and/or economic background were not taken into account as solely the interaction between the female game journalist and the network in which their identity construction takes place were needed.

Furthermore, through a snowball sampling technique, interviewees were found and approached for the in-depth interviews. Due to the specific target group required for these interviews, initially found interviewees were asked to suggest or contact other female game journalists from their own social/personal environment. Considering that the amount of female game journalists was limited to this research, 7 interviewees participated in this research.

The artifacts in this study are online (news) articles/blog posts, written by the interviewees, with a sample size of 35 articles/blog posts. Through these social artifacts, patterns and/or explanations were analyzed to compare with the in-depth interviews regarding these female game journalists' identification and presentation as female gamers. How female game journalists present themselves and their identity as female gamers during the in-depth interviews may or may not reflect back on how female game journalists present themselves in practice and within the community through online blogs. Hence, both methods complemented each other to discover how female game journalists exert their identity as a female game player and which aspects mentioned in both the in-depth interviews and online articles could be considered important in defining their identity.

### **3.4 Data collection**

#### **3.4.1. In-depth interviews**

The data collected for this research consisted of interviews firstly, where interviewees were asked about their expertise on the topic and experience with gaming in order to gather data for developing general/specific conclusions for all the interviewees' overall answers. Every interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. Through a semi-structured interview method, the interviewees were all individually asked about different topics through both pre-determined questions and questions stated "spontaneously" throughout the interviews. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), semi-structured interviews "are generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended

questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewees (DiCocco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 315). This way a more flexible conversation was made possible, enabling interviewees to express themselves more freely. Moreover, the interviews were held at the interviewees' own company, preferred location, or through Skype, ensuring interviews to be performed within a natural setting for them.

### **3.4.2 Document analysis**

The type of analysis chosen as secondary data was a document analysis. Document analysis is “‘unobtrusive’ and ‘non-reactive’— that is, the documents are unaffected by the research process as “the investigator’s presence does not alter what is being studied” (Bowen, 2009, p. 31). This can help exploring sources that can describe female gamer identity construction from outside the researcher’s own gathered data and from within the gaming community. Moreover, these products are written for the respective companies of the female gamer journalists, meaning that the contents remain unaffected by the researcher and can be directed by the company instead.

From the game news websites, 5 written articles per interviewee were chosen for analysis. Due to the explorative nature of this study, articles were chosen randomly in order to maintain diversity in content.

### **3.5 Data processing/analysis**

The data was processed through a mixed qualitative method analysis technique, where the in-depth interviews and documents were compared. For the semi-structured interviews, a questions/themes scheme was developed; for example, supplementary questions with sub-topics were added in order to provide the interviewer more variety in topics during the interviews. The interviews were recorded through an audio device.

Through thematic analysis, initially an open codebook was developed based on individuals (the interviewees), the case (female game journalists’ identity construction) and the artifacts (online blogs by female game journalists). Then, themes or patterns were identified and organized into (emergent) categories within an axial coding framework, where these categories were compared (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003).

Research questions 1 & 3	Axial codes (numbers = amount of interviewees)	Properties	Color properties
RQ1	Long time gamer (8), playing games with family/friends, family motivation to become gamer, entertainment and work (2), acceptance going through self-confidence, personal identity awareness, stigma expected to continue,	Gamer identity	Games are seen as entertainment and work Prejudice/discrimination against female gamers Experienced immersion with in-game characters Sociality through gaming
RQ3	Variety in games preferred (2), multiple genres preferred (4), disliking soccer games (3), gaming on laptops and consoles, multiple gaming platforms preferred (2), console games preferred	Games and platform preferences	Experience through long-time gaming Storyline importance Positive future female gamers Multiple genres preferred
RQ3	Contacted to play games through PC and consoles, disliking MMOs/MMORPGs	Game invite through platforms	
RQ1	Dismissing gendered gaming, dealing with prejudice, sexist remarks experienced, no discrimination experienced (1) experienced support against discrimination, expressed stereotypes towards female gamers	Experienced prejudice and social exclusion	
RQ3	Storyline considered important, avatar considered important, visuals considered important, character preference, experienced immersion with character, experienced immersion with storyline, engaged in theorycrafting, females considered better with empathizing, empathy towards character	Self-identification with in-game character/story	
RQ1	Socializing with both genders, No game-related interactions with other females, interested in socializing with other females, played in guild/clan (3), no guild/clan (3), expressing clan distinctiveness, socializing with other female gamers, involving family/friends	Socializing and gaming	
RQ1	Gaming as part of job, shared expertise on gameplay, teamwork preferred, PC/tablet for work	Gaming and work	
RQ1	Positive future female gamers (2), positive responses towards female gamers, expected increase female game students, expected increase in awareness	Future prospect female gamers/ female game journalists	

Figure 1. Axial coding of in-depth interviews and research question 1 and 3.

Research question 2: Articles		
Connected to RQ1	General announcements (7), news related to games (7)	General news/announcements
Connected to RQ3	Sense of in-game immersion, archer/witch roles preferred self-identification with character, empathy towards character, storyline considered important (2), music strengthens game-player relationship	Immersion/identification with in-game character/story
Connected to RQ1	Mentioning female gamers(5), discussing female gamers issues (5) addressing positions females in game industry(2), discrimination issues addressed, tropes and females in games, games considered male property, female gamer inclusivity needed, negativity towards booth babes	Female gamers and issues addressed
Connected to RQ1	Expressed closeness with community, sense of belongingness through guild, sense of allies	Socializing online
Connected to RQ3	Explaining gameplay (2), detailed explanation character gameplay strategy explained (2), explaining MMO gameplay explaining game graphics (2), importance in-game music	Sharing game-related information

Figure 2. Axial coding of online articles and research question 2.

Based on the axial coding, interpretations from the open codes were made and placed within sections. Within the axial coding, color properties were made as well as connections between the research questions. From there, axial codes were merged and selective codes were identified. Moreover, as a result of the selective coding process, categories for the data analysis were determined.

In the data analysis and results, all interviewees were given pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity within this research. Due to the public nature of their work as female game journalists, their own pseudonyms are also publicly shared and possibly known as well as the journalists' real names. Hence, through an online name generator, Dutch female names were chosen randomly and decided for the interviewees under the following pseudonyms:

- Interviewee 1: Lotte
- Interviewee 2: Sophie
- Interviewee 3: Annemarie
- Interviewee 4: Marjolein
- Interviewee 5: Jasmijn
- Interviewee 6: Ellen
- Interviewee 7: Liesbeth

These pseudonyms were applied throughout the data analysis and results section for both the in-depth interviews as well as the document analysis.

By providing a mixed qualitative method analysis, overlapping or differing results between the documents and interviews were interpreted more confidently without single-observer bias. This has supported the validity of this research, as constructed identity of female game journalists were explored throughout several data.

## 4. Data analysis

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### 4.1 Data processing

The core purpose of this research is exploring how female game journalists construct their identity as female gamers. Moreover, how they construct their identity as female gamers through online articles is also taken into account as well as the impact of technology on their identity creation. Through an ANT approach, these focus areas are explored and elaborated upon. According to Lee and Brown (1994), “Actor-Network asks us to be suspicious of humanistic determinations of agency” (Lee & Brown, 1994, p. 774). More specifically, it asks for rethinking the notion of agency and how it moves dynamically between the human and nonhuman as Lee and Brown (1994) also state that ANT “transgresses the boundary constructed within sociological discourse between the human and nonhuman, between the social and the nonsocial” (Lee & Brown, 1994, p. 774). This means that we need to rethink identity construction for female game journalists, for instance, by taking into account their work within and exposure to gaming environments and all the “non-humans” this brings into their lives on a constant basis. This includes the games they play, the processes of game creation/play and the production of texts about these games. The results in this research will draw back to the ANT approach, which serves as the supportive theory behind the female gamer identity construction by female game journalists.

Data for this study was gathered through expert interviews with 7 female game journalists from the Netherlands. Additionally, 35 online articles written by these female game journalists have been analyzed and used for this research as well, with 5 articles chosen per interviewee. From the expert interviews, approximately 280 minutes of data was collected and transcribed in Dutch. In this data analysis section, however, quotes from interviewees have been translated into English. Moreover, the online articles were gathered through the online games news websites on which the interviewees have written and placed articles.

The collected data altogether was analyzed through thematic analysis, which “minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Firstly, for this analysis an open coding was performed, which resulted in 424 open

codes. The open codes emerged from topics/issues as expressed by the interviewees throughout the interviews. With these open codes, an axial coding process followed up in which all open codes were placed into more specified areas to ascertain patterns amongst the given topics. These patterns ultimately resulted in identifying core themes that have been covered by all interviewees and elaborated upon.

Within this chapter, data analysis and results are written combined as they are deemed interconnected within this research.

## **4.2. Emergent themes**

Through an axial coding process several themes emerged from the in-depth interviews. The following key themes were identified and are seen as part of shaping the female gamer identity construction by female game journalists:

### **4.2.1. Gaming and influences on the self**

This theme explored the impact of gaming on interviewees and their personal lives. This entails everything that surrounds the interviewees' daily lives, such as their life style or how they view themselves as female gamers. This also includes colleagues and family or friends and how they respond on the interviewees' expressed gamer identity.

### **4.2.2. Discrimination and exclusion**

This theme is based on interviewees' experienced reception from others towards them for not only being a female gamer, but a female in general as well. The shared personal experiences were taken into account as well as shared experiences from others. Interviewees' identified social exclusion and stereotyping, for example, as factors that influence their self-expression as female gamers.

### **4.2.3. Sociality through gaming**

All interviewees' identified gaming as a social activity in which they engage in gaming with others; these are either friends/acquaintances or strangers. This theme was constructed

based on the interviewees' experiences on gaming with others and how that takes part in co-shaping the interviewees' identity as gamers as well.

#### **4.2.4. Impact of technology on the female gamer**

This theme emerged based on the first sub-research question for this research and focused on all technological aspects of gaming that can influence the expressed and constructed gamer identity of the interviewees. The focus was on self-identification with game characters and in-game storylines, for example. Moreover, from an ANT approach, the role technology plays in the interviewees' daily lives and its symbolic interaction with the interviewees has been taken into consideration as well.

#### **4.2.5. Online construction of the female gamer identity**

This theme emerged through an analysis of the online articles written by the interviewees. How the interviewees express their gamer identity during interviews can differ with how they express their gamer identity online. Moreover, due to restrictions in writing from their work, for example, the interviewees covered certain topic differently compared to how they covered it during the interviews. Hence, their expressed identity online has been focused on separately to explore if and how it can differ from how they would express themselves in interviews.

### **4.3 Gaming and influences on the self**

The main research question of this study focuses on identity construction of female game journalists as female gamers in general and is stated as the following:

*How do female game journalists construct their identity as female gamers?*

By taking this research question into account as well as the results from the thematic analysis, the following sub-themes emerged: gaming background, impact on self-confidence and booth babes and self-image.

### 4.3.1 Gaming background

Gaming background as a side category emerged from exploring the interviewees' background in gaming by covering topics such as the amount of years being active in gaming and their motivation for becoming female game journalists. All interviewees have indicated to be gamers since their childhood, and that they game on a regular basis as well. This may have been an important addition to their knowledge on gaming and was thus focused on. Hence, this topic was given a separate sub category within the female gamers and lifestyle theme.

All interviewees stated to have started gaming since a very young age and explained their family's input in enabling them to do so. Marjolein, for example stated: "my dad bought me the first PlayStation back then with the game Tomb Raider, it all started with that". Ellen also stated: "I got my first PlayStation when I was 12 from my dad; that is when I really started getting into gaming". Furthermore, all interviewees indicated to have played games with their family during their childhood (see section 4.4.1.).

### 4.3.2 Impact on self-confidence

One of the additional categories that emerged from the interviews was on interviewees' self-confidence. This does not only focus on the notion of being a gamer in general, but being a female gamer specifically as well. The gamer aspect in this case refers to how the interviewees view themselves as gamers as well as how they express to be perceived as gamers by others within the gaming community. Hence, factors that are identified to play a notable role in influencing self-confidence as a female gamer are identified as the following:

- Being part of the gaming community
- Being a female gamer
- Working as a journalist within the gaming industry

These factors combined can influence confidence amongst the interviewees in the extent to which they perceive themselves as an expert in the field of gaming. Interviewees Marjolein and 5, for example, both indicated that they feel insecure about their knowledge on gaming, resulting in work-related insecurity. Jasmijn claims, for example, that it occurs mainly because of remarks made by male colleagues. She expressed the following:



"I have had remarks from a male colleague, not per se on articles, but whenever I talked about a game-related topic, he would always say: "no, it is not like that"; giving me the feeling like I knew less about the topics. It felt really condescending".

Because of the already established positions of males within the gaming industry and experienced prejudice with female game journalists (see section 4.3.1.), the work relationship between colleagues can be influenced negatively and ultimately impact the female game journalists' self-confidence. Similar situations occurred to Marjolein, who also works for the same company. According to her, this type of behavior is linked to the fact that both she and her colleague, Jasmijn, are female. She states:

"There is one colleague who is very judgmental towards women and acting like a know-it-all while making us feel like we do not know anything. It makes me doubt myself and every work that I produce for the company".

However, Marjolein identifies that those remarks referred back to her gender personally, rather than it did to her job performance. Moreover, job insecurity was found even stronger with Jasmijn, as she also expressed the following: "also with reviews, I am always afraid that I am not critical enough because I liked a certain game. I am afraid my colleagues will look at it and trash it with "no, that is not good". As both interviewees work for the same company, it can be explained why both interviewees have had similar experiences with male colleagues. Due to this, incidents occurring at that specific company might not share with the other interviewees at their respective companies.

Despite initial negative reactions, some interviewees did gain positive reactions from male colleagues. Interviewees Lotte, Sophie and Ellen, for example, have had more positive experiences with colleagues for their delivered work and presence in their respective companies. When asked how male colleagues reacted to her arrival at her company, Ellen stated:

"They were super relaxed in working with another female at work. And the funny thing is, there was this one time when I had to write a piece and I chose the topic on females and gaming. Everybody reacted very enthusiastic on that".

This contradicts experiences from interviewees Marjolein and Jasmijn, but still shows Ellen's surprise for gaining positive reactions towards the work that she produced. This could acknowledge that she is aware of possible negativity towards her or her work. However, she indicated that she did not experience anything in that direction. Additionally, she also stated that the positive reactions boosted her self-confidence and motivated her to be more confident in the work she delivers: "I felt more comfortable at work because of by the support I gained and felt more confident with the work I deliver". From all the interviewees, Sophie was the only interviewee who did not get any reactions on her job performance or gender from male colleagues at all. However, despite never having to face negativity on the job, she does state that she is aware that there are female game journalists who do have to face that often: "I have never had to deal with discrimination from male colleagues. But I do often hear stories where females have had really negative experiences".

As all interviewees have experienced or heard from experiences with negative reactions from male colleagues, this could ultimately impact their self-confidence negative as well as was found with Marjolein and Jasmijn. However, if colleagues were to react positively, it could influence female game journalists' self-confidence positively as explained by Ellen.

#### **4.3.3 Booth babes and self-image**

One of the topics that were mentioned by Annemarie was on "booth babes". She expressed to feel either uncomfortable or insecure because of their presence at gaming events. According to Lotte and Annemarie, booth babes are females at game event as "cosplayers – a male/female wearing costumes to look like a game/cartoon character" or wear tight and revealing clothing to promote certain games/companies/consoles. They also express that these events are usually held to promote new games and provide an environment in which gamers can express their fandom.

During these events, not only journalists but regular visitors can be found as well.

Annemarie, for example, stated the following regarding the difference between females at these events:

“Of course, because of the booth babes at events you will feel uncomfortable as a woman. It is because you are a woman that you will be comparing yourself with them while they have no to little knowledge about gaming and are just standing there being pretty. I think it is a pity for women like us who are actually there for the games”.

By comparing herself with the females at game events, the interviewee expresses insecurity on appearance by mentioning that she compares herself with the females at these events. This could indicate that she feels overshadowed by booth babes, which can also result in being/feeling ignored by fellow gamers. It is notable that Sophie, for example, referred to these booth babes as rather being “beautiful” and “great cosplayers who are nicely dressed”. She did not express feeling uncomfortable because of their presence nor did she say anything about their knowledge on gaming.

The other interviewees, however, did not mention booth babes at all. The focus was rather on how they liked to be treated during these events themselves. Marjolein and Jasmijn both expressed that they did like getting special attention, for example. Marjolein stated: “I like it like this, that we are treated a bit special by our male colleagues. I like to feel special”. Jasmijn added: “one of our male colleagues even said, when we were talking about League of Legends, as: “wow that is so sexy! I have never heard females talk about gaming like this before.” I kind of liked that”. This can indicate that compliments based on their female gender can influence their self-confidence positively. By explicitly stating that she likes to be treated special, Jasmijn highlights that she would prefer being treated differently in a positive way as Marjolein shows as well. However, in this case as well, if the special treatment were to have a negative connotation to it, it could ultimately influence the self-confidence of both interviewees.

#### **4.4 Discrimination and exclusion**

Discrimination and exclusion was identified as one of the main themes during the interviews on which interviewees elaborated upon extensively. Discrimination was mentioned by all interviewees not only based on job performance, but on being a female specifically as well. This resulted in the following sub-themes: prejudice within the gaming industry, social exclusion from the gaming community, stereotypes and tropes and stigma towards female gamers.

#### 4.4.1. Prejudice within the gaming industry

Prejudice within the gaming industry was identified as a sub theme based on the interviewees' expressed negative experiences with male peers within the industry. All interviewees have indicated to have experienced prejudice from peers and colleagues at least once during their career as female game journalists. Within the industry, some fellow colleagues as well as community members might not be as acquainted to female game journalists and doubt their credibility. Moreover, prejudiced opinions on female game journalists and female gamers in general have influenced how female game journalists are treated and viewed to this day. Liesbeth stated: "male peers within the industry do have a certain image of you. I also noticed that during press trips, but my own male colleagues did receive me warmly in a way". This example shows how, despite being all kinds of professionals that are emerging in the gaming industry, prejudiced images for female game journalists are notably present. Moreover, the most common prejudice that was identified by 5 out of the 7 interviewees was on how girls were being unable to play games or review games like males do. Liesbeth, for example, has had a game review-related comment regarding her work from an online community member, where she stated the following:

"A really loyal reader left a comment on a violent game review on mine that it should not have been written by a woman, because the game was about masculinity and it would look bad towards the target group for this game. Apparently, women are not allowed to write about "male games" because they cannot understand what those games are about. We are too girly for that".

By interpreting violent games as being a males-only property, a male reader and community member, drew the assumption of female game journalists and female gamers in general, being unable to understand violent games. This can be taken as a primary example of one of the most common prejudice on female gamers but at the same time also discrimination based on their gender. Violent games can be associated with males in general, but this can nevertheless make the female game journalist feel underappreciated and not deemed as credible.

#### 4.4.2. Online harassment from the gaming community

Harassing female game journalists online by the gaming community has been one of the sub themes that was brought forward based on experiences on their work. Website visitors

would, for example, curse or post negative comments on articles or blog posts written by the interviewees. During gameplay, Lotte explained that she had to deal with hostility from community members and website visitors, for example. She stated:

“When I just started working at my current job, they just said: “well, go introduce yourself to the users on that online forum”. But back then they got heavily prejudiced towards me that I was some type of “Sims slut” that did not know anything”.

However, this negativity and cursing did disappear as Lotte also stated that: “nowadays they know better than that, but back then there was a real prejudice of “oh geez, there comes a chick on the forum, why is that necessary”; that was really visible”.

Annemarie who works at an all-female gamers website, compares that website with other websites for whom she works and explains a difference where community members react towards work written by females:

“You can already notice that when you become a member of a of a game site that people will, for example, ask for your cup size as soon as they hear that you are a female. There will always be people who do that, I am not saying that it will happen immediately, but I think that a female focused games news website is a less hostile environment to start, there are more accepting of female game journalists”.

Notably, because the all-female gamers website is more targeted towards female gamers, it is also more welcoming of female game journalists whereas regular game news websites towards broad audiences have community members that are less welcoming towards female game journalists. When the target group is females specifically, attention can be given more towards female gamers as well. However, if the community is already predominantly male, and general audiences focused websites address everybody in general, awareness of female gamers and female game journalists might remain little. As a result, male audiences may remain uninformed or little informed on the qualities of female gamers and journalists.

As a result to online harassment, Interviewees Sophie and Marjolein both stated specifically that despite that they received negative comments on their written work online, male colleagues would step in for them and defend their work. Liesbeth stated in response of a negative comment by a community reader that: “my male colleagues

stepped in and gave him a warning and also almost banned him. He apologized after that”, while Sophie stated the following:

“I recently wrote an article where a complete stranger commented with “why is this written by a woman blablabla”, and my male colleagues and other people would immediately respond with: “you should be ashamed of yourself, react like that” and that person got banned”.

These are examples of unwelcoming messages towards female game journalists, based on their gender, whilst enabling a limitation to express their identity as gamers as well.

Due to being unable to be seen as equals and constant harassment online, female game journalists might feel that they need to prove themselves harder than their male peers have to do.

#### 4.4.3 Stereotypes and tropes

Stereotypical images and tropes towards females and female game characters are one of the widely discussed topics from the interviews. Ellen explained the most common stereotypes by males within the gaming community towards female gamers as the following: "somehow, and it has become less, in order to be taken serious as a female gamer you have to be either very ugly, or really fat. Because, well, then you are a real nerd and allowed to touch a game". The general idea of female gamers thus remains negative and can be seen as denigrating. Jasmijn adds: “sometimes during gameplay, someone notices that you are a girl and if you make a mistake they will be like “oh, never mind it is a girl anyways”. They all have the opinion that females do not know how to play games”. Being bad gamers and having a bad appearance are a few stereotypes that have become apparent.

Additionally, experienced prejudice or harassment does not always happen outside of the gameplay. Video games throughout the years have always portrayed certain images of females which contain stereotypes and tropes in the most exaggerated ways, according to Marjolein, where female images could be portrayed negatively. She stated that in Japanese games especially, female characters are portrayed in a highly sexualized manner where they are wearing revealing clothes and highlighting certain body parts. She explained: “sometimes you can just see body parts moving of in-game female characters, like jiggle jiggle. I think that is very disgusting, just bleh, I do not have to see that”.

Regarding tropes especially, it can occur that in games female characters can be portrayed in a denigrating way, where Annemarie added: "I understand that females come off as stupid in games sometimes and that in Grand Theft Auto there need to be strippers; I just think it is becoming too noticeable". Also, Ellen stated: "I think that mainly the in-game tropes are what upset females. Primarily the games and the set-up of the games makes one think like: "Geez, do you really still think like that about women?". Through this, they explained that certain tropes can result for audiences to develop certain images towards women and, perhaps, also how they should be treated.

Annemarie also stated that even main characters that are female are not always great as they sound either: "for a while there was also a game where you had Samus as a main character in the game Medroid. But I even doubt about her image as she was always wearing super tight outfits and had very large breasts, so yeah".

#### **4.4.4 Stigma towards female gamers**

An ongoing stigma on female gamers in general throughout the years in which female gamers might not be taken as seriously as they would like to be, might have been the result of exclusion by male gamers and not sharing interests. Lotte and Annemarie, for example, both stated explicitly that there has always been, and still is, a stigma on female gamers and identified that as one of the main reasons for not being viewed equally as their male colleagues within the gaming industry. Annemarie explicitly stated, for example, that: "I used to study gender studies and because of that I have gained a stigma within the industry for being a feminist. It influences my credibility as a game journalist". The stigma for female gamers and female game journalists can be taken away, according to Lotte, if they were make sure to know their identity and have more self-confidence. She stated:

"I think that gaming will always be something for men and I am not stating that it will never be something for women, but in general it has a reputation that it is a men's thing. To get rid of the stigma, you will just have to be more self-confident as a woman and not have an identity crisis if you want to show that you like gaming".

This means that in order to not let the stigma keep them from playing games, female gamers within the gaming community should be more self-assured on their image.

#### 4.4.5 Future prospects for female gamers/female game journalists

How the interviewees view the future for female game journalists and female gamers in general was also a sub theme that was elaborated upon by the interviewees. Most interviewees determined a positive future for female gamers overall, where Lotte believed it will not change much for female gamers. She stated: “I do not think it will change much in the future. I think that gaming will always be for men, and I am not saying that there will not be more females, but in general there is just a reputation that it is more a men’s thing”. However, from all interviewees, Lotte remained the only person to indicate a slightly pessimistic point of view. Ellen, for example, provided a more optimistic perspective for the future of female gamers. She stated: “I think that there is a real difference in how the reactions are towards females now in the gaming world compared to 10 years ago. I think that the men in that world will come to realize that they could really use our effort”. Liesbeth added: “I think it will become more and more normal and that there will be less resistance from the older hardcore gamer audiences. I also believe there will be more female game journalists”. Both interviewees provided more positively toned arguments towards the future of female gamers as well as for female professionals within the gaming industry. Moreover, overall, 6 out of 7 interviewees approached working within the gaming industry more positively in regards to gaining acceptance from male colleagues in future.

### 4.5 Sociality through gaming

#### 4.5.1 Gaming and socializing with family

Family is considered an important part of shaping the gamer identity of the interviewees, as all of them have played and/or are still playing with family members. Sophie explains, for example, that she used to game a lot with her brothers and uncles when they would come to visit, where she was also allowed to play games that were not even appropriate for her age. In this way gaming was already becoming a social activity that was forming in the Sophie’s childhood, for example. Jasmijn indicated that she used to play games with family members as well, specifically her little sister and father, where it became part of their leisure time together. Nowadays, she still plays Counterstrike with her father every once in a while.



Lotte, Annemarie, Marjolein, Ellen and Liesbeth also played games and/or are still playing games with their siblings, parents and/or other family members. This shows a relationship between gaming and spending time as family, where being sociable through gaming can lead for female gamers to develop their identity at a younger age. Hence, gaming can here be seen as indeed enabling the interviewees to interact and socialize through gaming with family members and spend time together.

#### **4.5.2 Gaming and socializing with friends**

Similarly, gaming with friends is also identified as a sub theme where gaming with friends also can help in shaping the female gamer identity. More specifically, friends can play a role in the types of games the interviewees play as well and engage in interaction through games. Gaming with friends can then explain what type of gamer the interviewees are expressing themselves as, but their social life as well. Marjolein has male friends, for example, with whom she plays games on a regularly. She explained: “I mainly have male friends who are gamers. I often play games with them and talk about games with them on a regular basis”. Games can thus be used for leisure time with others while enabling sociality for the interviewees as well.

Whereas some friends accept and view the interviewees as “real female gamers”, others seem uninterested in gaming, creating a restriction for the interviewees to express themselves through gaming with those friends. Ellen, for example, mentioned that with her female friends especially, because of their disinterest in gaming, she does not feel like she can express herself as who she is. She mentioned the following: “the difficult thing is that, from the girl friends that I have, that they are very girly. So that is kind of difficult, because even if I can tell them something about games, they would not understand anything from it and I cannot express myself as much as I want”. Notably, male friends are more likely to engage in gaming and talking about gaming with the interviewees rather than their female friends. Here, the gap between males and females in gaming can be explained by disinterest by females with gaming, as also indicated by Ellen. Annemarie, however, is surrounded by female gamers as her colleagues at one of the websites she works for are all females. However, she acknowledged not having female friends within her personal environment that have an interest in gaming: “I have female friends who do not game much, but they do have boyfriends who game often so I talk and game with them all

the time". Disinterest by females with games can influence the interviewees' expressed identity as female gamers by limiting the options to talk about gaming. However, as Annemarie shows, there can be other options to socialize about gaming through their female friends, with in this case their boyfriends.

### **4.5.3 Clans and guilds**

Gaming with others can also take place outside of the physical, personal environment and can be done through game platforms and certain games. In clans and guilds people form a group together into a team to help each other get through levels and improve their own character's abilities, for example. Conversations amongst clan or guild members occur through screen text and/or headphones where gamers can interact with each other. Gamers can join a clan or guild, whether they are acquaintances or strangers, and also fight in-game with other clans/guilds. Lotte has played in a clan for a long time and has had positive experiences with clan members who were initially strangers that she met through an online game. She stated the following on her clan:

"I thought it was really amazing, you would always come back to the same group of people and you would really get the idea that they were friends of yours. It is really fun to play with a group of people who keeps on returning, so that you will play with each other instead of having to meet new people every time. You just build a connection and it is fun, you can actually chill in the game while not even playing it"

Online games, with especially MMOs, can thus provide an in-game leisure space where clan or guild members can connect and engage in conversations with each other without having to play the game. Moreover, having a sense of a connection with strangers, who eventually can become friends, shows the social side of online gaming through gameplay.

## **4.6 Impact of technology on the female gamer**

The impact of technology, with in particular games, in the lives of the interviewees was researched as well. This theme emerged based on the analysis of the in-depth interviews and sub-research question 1, which was stated as the following:

*How can technology influence female game journalists' identity construction as female gamers?*

#### 4.6.1 Gaming and daily life

All interviewees have identified gaming as part of their daily lives; for Sophie this became evident especially, as she stated: “everything I do is about games; this whole building is about games. I can do other things on my day off but that is not what I want to do”.

Marjolein stated: “I do chose gaming over watching movies and sometimes even over my friends”. Additionally, Jasmijn stated: “sometimes I feel the need that I have to game, otherwise I will feel something like withdrawal symptoms”. Annemarie also stated the following about games in her daily life: “when I get home I just sit between the game posters and gaming platforms.

And you just know that you will be gaming then; you cannot avoid talking about it”. Games are notably playing a large role in the interviewees’ daily lives. As Sophie indicated, gaming is not only something that she does for her work; she is also drawn to it in her own free time. Hence, games have become an integral part into the lives of the interviewees, where they may prioritize games over other things and people as well.

#### 4.6.2 Platform preferences

Platforms for gaming can be considered both the medium and enablers of communication through which gamers can play games and interact with games at the same time. From all interviewees, 3 out of 7 prefer multiple platforms; 2 interviewees prefer PC gaming only, whereas 2 other interviewees prefer console games. Marjolein and 5 indicated to play on PC games mainly, however, both interviewees stated to be open towards the new PlayStation 4 console. Regarding their preference for a PC over other platforms, Jasmijn stated: “a PC responds quicker to my opinion. A mouse works very fast for example. I just think it is chill”. Despite being a PC gamer in general, Annemarie has gained openness for other platforms. She stated: “I play a lot of platform games but now I have gained a preference for consoles now that I have PlayStation 4. But it differs per person, I just like innovative technologies”. Having a preference for a certain platform can also be seen as part of the female gamer identity; PC gaming requires different knowledge on how to use the PC as a medium to play games with compared to console gaming where other knowledge on usage is needed, for example. Moreover, the type of games available for

platforms can also differ, resulting for gamers to experience different ways of interacting with the platforms, the games and everything incorporated into the process of gaming.

#### **4.6.3 Immersion with storyline**

Storyline immersion was experienced most with interviewees 2 and 6, where with especially role-playing games, stories are seen as the most important part of a game. Ellen stressed: “the advantage of what I have is that especially when the story is really good, you can give me the worst graphics ever and I would still play that game, because you get obsessed with the story in a way”. In-game story can thus play an important role in whether a game is being liked by the game player.

Ellen also added: “with Japanese RPGs especially, you can follow the story, think along, empathize with the characters, and it is funny to see how the characters respond towards each other in the game and stuff like that”. Games can then create a space within which game players can mentally take place as a form of escapism, for example, and place themselves within the in-game stories. Liesbeth additionally stated to only play games if the stories are well presented. She explained: “if the story is too cheesy, I will immediately stop playing that game”. These remarks exemplify that superficial features, such as in-game graphics – quality of images – are less important and do not necessarily provide better immersion with a game compared to in-game stories.

#### **4.6.4 Self-identification with characters**

Identification with characters requires being able to place yourself within a certain character and empathize towards him/her. Through self-identification, game players can feel as experiencing the experiences of the in-game characters as if it were happening to them. Ellen gave an explanation of an expressed empathy towards a character:

“I am a huge fan of Joel from the Last of Us. I thought that was an awesome guy and incredible person with whom you can enormously identify with. And how he built his relationship with Ellie, yes I totally felt that, those are things that can really touch me which I find really beautiful about games. Games are becoming more humanlike in terms of ability in choices and stuff”.

As Ellen stated that games are becoming more humanlike, she also expressed that the relationships built between in-game characters are also affecting her as if they were happening in real life. Through empathizing with characters and gaining a sense of nonhumans, the games, becoming more humanlike, a sensed personification effect be determined with in-game characters.

For some interviewees, however, self-identification with game characters was not expressed as much as for Ellen. Annemarie explained, for example, that because there are too little female characters within games, having a connection with the game and its characters becomes difficult. She stated: “the game media just does not reflect back upon the general population as they could. Now audiences cannot identify themselves with main characters”. Additionally, Jasmijn stated: “I always purposely choose female characters. Once I had to play a man and had to date a woman. I realized that it was not for me, it felt awkward”. Hence, the limitations of being able to choose female characters can influence how well a game player can connect with the game and, ultimately, its characters.

## **4.7 Online construction of the female gamer identity**

How the interviewees’ express and constructed their identity online was explored to provide inside in whether it differs from their expressed identity outside their online, work-related environments and in what ways. Sub-themes emerged based on the online articles written by the interviewees and sub-research question 2, which is as follows:

*How do female game journalists construct their identity as female gamers through online articles?*

### **4.7.1 Expressed immersion with in-game storylines and characters**

Through their online articles, some interviewees expressed a sense of immersion with in-game storylines and characters. Lotte often mentioned in-game characters from Elder Scrolls online, while referring to herself personally. Immersion with the game itself also became evident, where she placed herself within the levels and explained situations as they were happening to her: “armored with my new skills, I started my mission to help the people on the island. Since they also helped me out, I decided that this was the least I could do”. This could potentially indicate a sense of in-game environment awareness and its effect on Lotte’s personal need to “do good” and provide help to the in-game

characters. Notably, Lotte also indicated an observation of other in-game characters “I saw a lot of Nords, but Rana was a dark elf, just like me”. This shows knowledge on the in-game characters, but also comparison of a certain character with her chosen character. As the articles progressed about her gameplay, her personification with her character became notably stronger. Moreover, she referred to herself rather than stating her character’s name as if events were happening to her personally.

#### **4.7.2 Sociality online: guild/clans**

In her online articles about gameplay and review of the game “The Elder Scrolls Online”, Lotte noted that she became part of a guild during gameplay and it gave her a sense of belongingness to a group. This became evident when she stated, for example: “I became part of a guild and it felt good to talk with a small group of people about the game”. Moreover, she stated that: “now that I have new allies, the experience in Tamriel – an in-game level – will only get better”. This reflects back on what she had stated during the interview, where a guild gives her a sense of friendship. Both in the interview and online articles, she expressed a welcoming attitude towards joining a guild and, more notably, getting a sense of belongingness by becoming part of a group. Marjolein also expressed that, during gameplay, she joined a clan to continue gaming with.

#### **4.7.3 Female gamers as a topic**

From all interviewees, 3 have written articles online on the topic of female gamers in order to raise more awareness. Mainly the current positions of female gamers within the community were expressed within those articles as well as discrimination issues. Regarding the negative position of female gamers within the gaming community, Sophie, and 6 all have written articles on female gamer discrimination and what should be done to end it. The issue that is notable at this moment, according to the interviewees, is that female gamers are not welcome. Annemarie, for example, gave several reasons for why female gamers are not feeling welcome in the gaming scene:

“Game sites create an image of women exactly like it happens in games: they are standing on the side line, they have enormous chests and they are only there to look at. Articles in which women are presented are filled with words like “tasty”, “big boobs” or “she looks \*\*\*\*\*”.

Due to this, female gamers might become hesitant to join games websites and actively participate within the community according to Annemarie. Also, just as stated in the interview, Annemarie mentioned that there should be more female game characters as well. She explained: “the important thing with a female lead character is that you need to get a sense of that you are playing as her, not with her”.

Sophie also covered the topic of female gamers, where she did talk about booth babes more extensively compared to the interview. Booth babes are, according to Sophie, one of the problems why females get prejudiced or stereotyped in the industry and “distract you from your purpose at events: gaming and networking”. These remarks suggest that social exclusion from female gamers are not only noticeable within gaming communities, but that discrimination and sexist remarks are apparent as well.

# 5. Discussion

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## 5.1 Social exclusion and discrimination

Constructing identity as gamers as well as expressing and sharing them, has been indicated by all interviewees as a challenge since the start of their career as female game journalists. Social exclusion and discrimination from male gamers from gaming communities and/or male colleagues resulted in limiting the female game journalists in expressing their identity as gamers in their own preferred manner, which was seen as the primary obstacle for them in achieving freedom in expression.

Discrimination within the industry still plays a large role and impacts female gamers and female game journalists' identity outside their own expressed identity. From an ANT perspective, this relates back to actors within networks who can define their identity themselves but are bound to the network and have their identities co-constructed by other actors as well. Hereby, getting acceptance from gaming communities wherein female game journalists are established has been a difficult task, as they were not deemed credible.

Solutions for female gamers to gain acceptance within gaming communities and being accepted as "real" gamers might remain a problem if they keep being kept in the background, both inside and outside the gameplay (Shaw, 2011). Additionally, Shaw (2011) adds that "the lack of portrayals of marginalized groups in video games is often tied to the fact that the industry rarely recognizes members of these groups as gamers" (Shaw, 2011, p. 28). This is consistent with what Annemarie explained, where many marginalized groups in gaming, with particularly females, are not give enough spotlight within games, for example.

### 5.1.2 Socializing through games and impact on identity

As Cole and Griffiths (2007) and Domahidi et al. (2014) explain, MMOs provide game players with space and opportunities for socializing and maintaining relationships (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Domahidi et al., 2014). Additionally, Hussain and Griffiths (2008) state: "research has found that online communication allows for the development of computer-mediated social support (e.g., support via email and chatrooms), which could buffer the



negative effects of stressful life circumstances, as do types of noncomputer-mediated social support” (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008, p. 47).

From the interviewees that have played in MMOs and clans/guilds, it also became evident that interacting through these digital mediated environments enabled a sense of support and added an interactive dimension to the gaming experience. From the in-depth interviews, it became evident that interviewees, such as Lotte, who played within clans or guilds, all bonded with the clan or guild members and indicated a sense of friendship. From the online articles, similarly, Lotte and Marjolein indicated the feeling of being able to make friends and becoming part of clans/guilds through online games. All interviewees that played within clans/guilds point out the importance of socializing through games and enjoy making friends through them as well. Hence, the games do not only provide the platforms wherein communications can be established, but the interviewees’ indicated dependency of playing a game for socializing purposes as well.

This also relates back to the interviewees’ identity constructions and how the network wherein all actors are situated co-creates that identity. Devos and Banaji (2003) stated that group identity sometimes can influence how gamers can refer to themselves and how they make sense of who they are (Devos & Banaji, 2003). However, Devos and Banaji (2003) also pointed out through self-categorization theory, that being part of a gamer group can influence personal identity of gamers, where they can see themselves more as exemplars of a particular group rather than an individual within a group of gamers (Devos & Banaji, 2003). Within the results of this research, no interviewee indicated a sense of loss of personal identity while engaging and participating within clans or guilds. However, Marjolein and Jasmijn, for example, did stress that being part of a clan or guild means being dedicated to it and investing lots of effort and time. As a result, the clan/guild identity is being taken on as a priority during gameplay, enabling for individuality and individual identity to get lost amidst the gaming experience.

Gaming with others through “offline” games also was provided by the interviewees as an important aspect in their enjoyment of gaming and how gaming serve as conversation enablers. Whether gaming was shared with family or friends, it was the social act of gaming that was indicated as one of the key factors for the interviewees to play games. These findings suggest that female game players find socializing an important aspect of gaming as they include and embed gaming within their personal lives.

Making friends and playing games together plays a significant role in how female game journalists from this study refer back to themselves and how they perceive their own identity.

## 5.2 Impact of games/platforms on the self

As indicated by Lagesen (2012) as well as Beavis and Charles (2007), games and technologies in general have always been considered gendered and primarily associated with males (Lagesen, 2012; Beavis & Charles, 2007). Results within this research also discovered this notion with interviewee Lotte, who was the only interviewee that stated that games, in her point of view, will always be recognized as a male's "thing". However, she also indicated the importance of technological aspects of gaming, such as gaming platforms, in her daily life. Despite expressing that technologies will remain gendered, she also acknowledged that gaming plays an important role in her life and thus dismisses the notion of gaming being part of gendered technologies in her case. Additionally, most interviewees stated that gaming is immersed within their everyday lives; for example, Jasmijn indicated that gaming is omnipresent in her life and that she cannot be herself without it, as it would feel like a part of her were to be missing. These findings thus suggest that technological influences from gaming are sensed within the interviewees' constructed identity. By surrounding themselves with everything that relate to gaming, whether it is within domestic or work environments, they immerse themselves with as many game-related actors as possible and at the same time let gaming co-construct their everyday lives and daily routines, for example.

In terms of games and genre preferences, misconceptions from the gaming industry on game preference for both sexes, resulted in many games to be targeted at males primarily, with especially action related games (Fullerton et al., 2008). According to Hayes (2005), in general, "women already are gaming in growing numbers but they tend not to play the more complex, revenue-generating "hard-core" games such as first-person shooters and fantasy games in as many numbers as men" (Hayes, 2005, p. . However, as became evident within this research, all interviewees have indicated to especially prefer "hard-core" games that indeed include first-person and fantasy games. This could be explained for their professional roles within the gaming industry as well as being exposed

to these types of games often, which is also indicated by Hayes (2005) as part of their work (Hayes, 2005). However, it still might not give a thorough understanding why hard-core games are preferred by a small group inside the female gamer population, regardless of having a job within the gaming industry. Ultimately, these results present that hard-core games can be seen as mirroring interviewees' perceived equal gamer identities with those of male gamers. Rather than thinking of such games as for males only, the interviewees immerse themselves with the gameplay. Interestingly, all interviewees indicated to play hard-core games because they are not as obvious for female game players. Hereby, by playing these games and become skilled, they can achieve social acceptance by male gamers as well as colleagues.

### **5.3 Unexpected findings**

The topic on booth babes was unexpectedly mentioned by most interviewees, where interviewees Marjolein and Jasmijn explicitly stated to be personally affected on their self-confidence as female gamers as well as female game journalists. The overall perspective of booth babes is based on their good looks as well as in gaining widespread attention from male gamers and male game journalists (Fullerton et al., 2008). For some interviewees, however, this was interpreted as a negative impact on their self-esteem. Fullerton et al. (2008) share the view that booth babes indeed have a negative reputation amongst gaming communities and support the notion that those females that attend game events as booth babes are only supposed to "look pretty", rather than perceived as gamers (Fullerton et al., 2008). This view was equally shared by interviewee Annemarie, who expressed disappointment of the presence of booth babes at events as well, as their inexperience with gaming impacts the images and perceived identities of female gamers and female game journalists negatively.

Another key issue that came up from the topic on booth babes was the focus on how booth babes made the interviewees feel less female-like and less attractive, with Marjolein, Jasmijn and Annemarie in particular. This could refer to sensed competition amongst females within the same network as female game journalists strive for recognition from male peers/colleagues as described by the interviewees.

This unexpected finding can be considered an important part of female gamers constructed identity as it reflects upon them personally and their indicated importance of femininity.

Another unexpected finding referred to the interviewees' preferred behaviors from male colleagues/peers. As all interviewees indicated that sexist remarks based on their female gender have been made, or are still being made, some interviewees contradicted themselves as well. For example, Jasmijn and Marjolein both stated that they do not approve of (sexist) remarks from male colleagues based on their female gender and explained how female game journalists can feel uncomfortable due to that. However, they also both stated that they like being treated differently by male colleagues at the same time for being females. For example, Jasmijn stated that she appreciated a comment by a male colleague for how the way she shares knowledge on gaming as being "sexy". This contradictory statement, shows a complicated personal evaluations on acceptable treatment by male colleagues. On the one hand, remarks based on female gender are not accepted, but on the other hand, they are accepted when presented within a different context.

In terms of identity construction, this could mean that the interviewees express a willingness to control their identity construction. However, as indicated by Devos and Banaji (2003), involved groups of actors within the network in which these female game journalists are active, can co-construct their identity in their own personal evaluations.

## **5.4 Research limitations**

### **5.4.1 In-depth interviews and online articles**

For the in-depth interviews, it became apparent from the beginning that finding female game journalists within the Netherlands to participate in this study was going to be a difficult task. From all game news related websites within the Netherlands that were approached, only a small group of female game journalists were found to participate in this research. As indicated by the interviewees, there are too little female game journalists active within the Netherlands compared to male game journalists. However, as these interviews were conducted with assumed experts on female game identity constructions and identity placements within gaming communities, the amount of interviewees were

deemed sufficient. Moreover, all interviewees have agreed on almost all expressed topics and addressed key issues that were applicable to all of them as well.

Analyzing and interpreting online articles written by the interviewees provided with some challenges as well. Firstly, some interviewees only wrote specific sections within their company website, influencing the outcomes of the data analysis into retrieving limited data. This meant that some expressed topics, such as female gamers, were not discussed by interviewee Marjolein at all, for example, as she primarily writes game related news on her company's website rather than her own topics. Secondly, due to company provided writing formats, the interviewees might have been limited in their writing style as well as in their own preferred topics which provided less rich information during the coding process compared to the in-depth interviews. However, these differences also proved as an important finding by itself as well, where the interviewees apparently were able to express themselves more profoundly during the interviews compared to their online expressed identity; this was more standardized according to the acceptable standards from the industry (and probably also from the gaming communities).

#### **5.4.2 Limited research on female gamer identity construction**

Theory on female gamers in general focused primarily on discrimination and social exclusion issues, which also was brought forward during the interviews. However, not much literature on female gamer identity construction specifically was found and hence a comparison was limited. Despite a limitation in research on female gamer identity construction specifically, with especially from an ANT point of view, broad areas of research did cover key issues concerning female gamers and female game workers. Many of topics from these researches were found within the in-depth interview analysis and online articles analysis as well.

As I am a female gamer myself, I am highly acquainted with the topics and issues addressed by the female game journalists during the in-depth interviews and online articles. This could open possibility for researcher bias; however, due to the knowledge constructed in the theoretical framework, the understanding of the findings was less subjective. Furthermore, the unexpected findings and results enhanced the objectivity of this research

## 6. Conclusion

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This research aimed to explore how female game journalists construct their identity as female gamers, as supported by the actor-network (ANT) approach. Hereby, identity construction was illustrated by implementing all actors, both humans and nonhumans, and their involvement within the construction of the female gamer identity. Studies into identity construction in online and offline environments, gendered technologies, sociality of gaming and actor-network theory, have provided an insight into topics concerning female gamers. Additionally, these studies raised key issues that need more thorough research in future studies as well.

Through in-depth interviews and online articles, a thematic analysis was performed which found results that either complemented previous studies or contradicted them. Firstly, this research found that female gamers cannot have full autonomy in their constructed identity as both human and nonhuman actors co-create their identity. For example, interviewees in this research indicated having to work harder to gain credibility as “real” gamers compared to male gamers/peers in the industry. Moreover, they expressed that opinions based on the female gender have pre-determined an image regarding female gamers and limited the interviewees in changing negative constructed identities from people in general.

Secondly, socializing through online games as well as “offline” games was considered one of the most important reasons for interviewees to engage in gaming, whether it involves friends, family and/or acquaintances. Hereby, interviewees indicated that playing games with others define how they perceive themselves as sociable.

Lastly, interviewees stated that gaming provided them with a sense of completeness and indicated to surround themselves with gaming at all times. This confirms the belief that technological dependence is experienced with all interviewees and that it plays an important part in how interviewees perceive themselves not only as gamers, but as their personal self as well. With in-game characters and in-game storylines, for example, empathy was found with all interviewees; primarily storylines were considered important with not only game enjoyment but in impacting the personal self on beliefs and morals as well.

## 6.1 Future research

As previous research has already pointed out, very little is known about female gamers and their identity roles within gaming (Taylor, 2008; Yates & Littleton, 2010). There has been research on discrimination issues and stereotyped perceptions towards female gamers, but how their identity is constructed and what it means to construct an identity as a female gamer, has not been performed extensively. Moreover, the effects of technology, such as in-game characters, on identity construction have not been explored widely on female gamers from an Actor-Network approach, which ensures involving nonhuman actors into the identity “network” as well. Actor-network has been widely used in research for its approach and how it can give meaning to written texts and relationships between actors, for example. In terms of how it fits within the subject of female gamer identity constructions as both gamers as well as professionals is open for more research, where a need is in determining how all elements that shape identity are placed together and how they can influence female gamers’ personal identity

From the online article analysis, it became evident that open coding was limited due to different article topics and thus content. However, as this analysis was performed by one researcher only, future research that focuses on analyzing online articles from female game journalists as well should consider inviting a second reader to co-analyze articles. This could result in more rich data and also provide more reliability of results because the documents can be processed twice, by two different researchers. Moreover, subjectivity to this topic could be restricted even more, when especially a researcher is well acquainted with the topic and fits the profile of the research subjects.

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# Appendix I: Interview guide

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## Interview guide: English version

The topic of this research is female game journalists and their expressed identity as female game players.

### 1. Introduction (general) questions

1.1) How long have you been a gamer?

1.1.1) What type of games did you like to play in the past?

1.1.2) Why did you decide to become a game journalist?

1.1.3) What other types of work do you perform within the industry?

1.2) What games are you currently into?

1.2.1) What game did you find the most fun?

1.2.2) What game have you found the most challenging?

### 2. Main questions

2.1) Given that there are a lot less female game journalists, do you find that this matters? And in what ways?

2.2) Are there other female gamers with which you talk about gaming?

2.2.1) Do you purposely engage with them (or not)?

2.2.2) If yes, what types of topics do you talk about?

2.2.3) How do they contact you to go log on a game and play together?

2.2.4) Are you part of a clan or guild or have you ever been part of a clan or guild?

2.3) Do you make any distinctions between your gaming life, journalism, jobs and your friends and family?

2.4) How do your personal relationships respond to your interest in games?

2.5) On which platforms do you play games?

2.5.1) Which platform do you prefer the most?

2.5.2) Is the one better than the other in your opinion?

2.5.3) On what moments do you think that this matters?

2.6) Which platforms do you use for blogging/writing and how?

2.7) When you play the game "X", what character do you prefer playing with the most and why?

2.8) How would you describe this character? Why would you prefer this character over others?

2.8.1) What changes did you apply to this character (e.g. appearance)?

2.8.2) How do you feel when certain events happen to your character during gameplay?

2.8.3) How would you navigate through MMORPGs?

2.9) Given that this is your profession, what do you think is the relationship between gaming and entertainment for you and others?

2.9.1) How do you think it can be compared to films or music?

### **3. Closing question / rounding off**

3.1) What do you think the future has in store particularly for female game players?

## **Interview guide: Nederlandse versie**

Het onderwerp van dit onderzoek is gericht op vrouwelijke game journalisten en hun uitgevoerde identiteit als vrouwelijke gamers.

### **1. Introductie (algemene vragen)**

1.1) Hoelang ben je al een game

1.1.1) Wat voor spellen speelde je vroeger graag?

1.1.2) Waarom besloot je om een game journalist te worden?

1.1.3) Doe je nog enig ander werk in de industrie?

1.2) Wat voor games ben je tegenwoordig in geïnteresseerd?

1.2.1) Welk spel vond je tot nu toe het leukst?

1.2.2) Welk spel vond je tot nu toe het meest lastig om uit te spelen of om doorheen te komen?

### **2. Hoofdvragen**

2.1) Gezien dat er veel minder female game journalisten zijn in de industrie, vind je dat dit wat uit maakt? En op welke manieren?

2.2) Zijn er andere female gamers met wie je over gaming praat? Vriendinnen of collega's?

2.2.1) Praat je dan gericht met hen over gamen (of niet)?

2.2.2) Indien ja, wat voor onderwerpen komen er dan aan bod?

2.2.3) Hoe nemen zijn contact met jou op om online te gaan om samen te spelen?

2.2.4) Ben je deel van een clan of guild of heb je wel eens deel uitgemaakt van een clan of guild?

2.3) Maak jij onderscheid tussen gaming en je werk, collegas, vrienden, familie enzovoorts?

2.4) Hoe reageert jouw persoonlijke omgeving op je interesse in gaming?

2.5) Op welke platforms speel je games?

2.5.1) Op welk platform speel je het liefst games en waarom?

2.5.2) Vind je de ene platform beter dan de ander en waarom?

2.5.3) Op welke momenten denk je dat dit uitmaakt?

2.6) Welke platformen gebruik je voor bloggen of schrijven voor werk?

2.7) Wanneer je je het spel "X" speelt, welk character speel je het liefst mee en waarom?

2.8) Hoe zou je deze character omschrijven?

2.8.1) Welke veranderingen kon je aanbrengen aan je character?

2.8.2) How voel je je wanneer bepaalde dingen gebeuren met je character tijdens het spel (bijvoorbeeld nare gebeurtenissen)? Leef je met ze mee?

2.8.3) Hoe navigeer je in een MMORPG?

2.9) Gezien dat dit je werk is, wat denk je dat de relatie is van gaming en entertainment voor jou vergeleken met anderen?

2.9.1) Hoe kan het vergeleken worden met andere vormen van entertainment zoals televisie of muziek?

### **3.) Laatste vraag/afsluiting**

3.1) Wat denk je dat de toekomst zal bieden voor vrouwelijke gamers?



## Appendix II: Overview interviewees

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Information on interviewees was kept minimal to ensure maintaining interviewees' privacy. Due to the public nature of their work, specific information was thus not enclosed.

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Short description</b>
1: Lotte	The interviewee works as a female video game journalist for an online games news website. She was contacted through her work e-mail as given on the games news website's "editors" section.
2: Sophie	The interviewee works as female game journalist for an online game news website and as a game producer/public relations manager for a Dutch game studio in Utrecht as well. She was contacted through her work e-mail as given on the game news website's "crew" section.
3: Annemarie	The interviewee works as a freelance female game journalist/editor for several Dutch games news websites throughout the Netherlands.
4: Marjolein	The interviewee works as a freelance female game journalist/editor for a Dutch games news website in the Netherlands. She is a co-worker of Jasmijn.
5: Jasmijn	The interviewee works as a freelance female game journalist/editor for a Dutch games news website in the Netherlands. She is a co-worker of Marjolein.
6: Ellen	The interviewee works as a freelance female game journalist/editor a games news website in the Netherlands. She was contacted through her e-mail, as shown on the websites' "staff" section.
7: Liesbeth	The interviewee works as a freelance female game journalist/editor for several Dutch game news websites in the Netherlands. She was contacted through her e-mail, as shown on one of the websites' "staff" section.