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**EXPERIENCES OF QUEER BLACK AND LATINX MASCULINE IDENTIFYING
INDIVIDUALS IN ONLINE GAMING SPACES: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

A Dissertation in

Counselor Education

by

Carlos Medina V

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The dissertation of Carlos Medina V was reviewed and approved by the following:

Richard J. Hazler
Professor of Education (Counseling Education)
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

Ashley N. Patterson
Assistant Professor of Education (Curriculum & Instruction)

Tyler Hollett
Assistant Professor of Education (Learning, Design, and Technology)

JoLynn V. Carney
Professor of Education (Counseling Education)
Professor-in-Charge

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this narrative study was to understand the experiences of Queer Black and Latinx masculine identifying individuals in online gaming spaces. The study aimed to identify how online gaming spaces impacted the identity and how identity played a role in navigating these digital spaces. This study focused on nine Queer Black and Latinx masculine identifying individuals to learn about their experiences in online gaming spaces and gain understanding into the potential impacts experiences in digital spaces have on identity and how identity informed how individuals worked to navigate digital spaces.

This qualitative dissertation thematically analyzed the narrative of nine individuals. Purposeful sampling, followed by snowball sampling, was used to select individuals to obtain diverse perspectives. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview conducted online due to COVID-19. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Black Cyberfeminism (Richard & Gray, 2018) was used as to frame a conceptual framework for analysis.

Five themes emerged from the data: Self, Emotions, Action, Maintenance, and Community. Analysis found that experiences with harassment contributed to feelings of isolation, and low self-esteem. Participants could not rely on in-game mechanics to mitigate harassment. Communities made up of other Queer People of Color provided support and affirmation for participants in online gaming spaces. Additional research is needed to explore the experiences of younger individuals in the age range of their identity development and moving from exploratory research to action.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The participation of individuals engaging with video games is continuously increasing with consumers spending a total of \$23.5 billion on the game industry in 2015. The Internet and Television Association (2017) reports that 63% of U.S. households include at least one gamer with gamers spending an average of 6.5 hours a week playing with others in online environments. What was once considered to be a recreational activity has evolved into career opportunities. The increase in the number of individuals engaging with video games have led to an emergence of video game studies.

The diversity of individuals who engage with video games, although limited, are showing a trend in the increased participation of video game players from underrepresented populations, specifically, in regards to gender, race, and sexual orientation. Women video game players, for example, have been one of the largest populations to increase with nearly 48% of people who play video games including women (Pew Research Center, 2015). Numbers of racial minorities owning and playing video games is beginning to increase as well. Pew Research Center (2017) also reports 89% of Black teens as well as 69% of Hispanic teens play some form of video game. Rockwood (2006) reports 23% of respondents in a study identified as “completely gay/lesbian” in a survey to gauge the amount of gamers part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transexual, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual plus (LGBTQIA+) community. Despite the increased participation of diverse individuals, game production

and textual content continues to reflect dominant white, male culture (Leonard, 2009; Nakamura 2013; Shaw, 2012).

Culture in Online Gaming Spaces

Early digital scholars theorized individuals' physical self, including identity, would not impact experiences online since no one on the other side of the screen knows who we are (Daniels, 2013; Gray, 2016, 2017). It turned out not to be that simple, because online access was traditionally a privileged resource where White-maleness is often assumed (Gray, 2017). Our physical selves, and by extension our identities, are not left behind when we enter virtual spaces (Gray 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2017). These digital scholars have challenged past views suggesting that identity did not impact online environments experiences. The challenges are illuminating how digital spaces, and specifically gaming, have centered white-maleness and marginalizes historically underrepresented individuals.

Gaming environments have historically centered white-maleness in its development process. Some scholars believe this is due to gaming companies catering to its larger audience that has historically consisted of majority white-males. Video games lack diverse characters (Brock, 2011; Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007; Mou & Peng, 2009). Video games that do include women and people of color often portray these populations in stereotypical and hyper-sexualized ways (Downs & Smith, 2005; Mou & Peng, 2009; Fron, et al., 2007; Nakamura, 1995; Williams, et al., 2009). This lack of representation and perpetuation of stereotypes in gaming contribute to insulating beliefs about marginalized communities within gaming spaces.

Historically underrepresented individuals have voiced concerns of the lack of diversity and challenges faced in gaming. Primarily white males who play video games have pushed back in attempt to oppose “political” intrusion of gaming culture with threats and spreading false information about women and feminists in gaming (Chess & Shaw, 2015). This is a cultural moment in gaming known as GamerGate (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mortensen, 2018). This controversy centered on social criticism and diversification in video games. Supporters of Gamergate believed that video game journalism that identified issues of sexism was corrupt and influenced by feminist movements (Chess & Shaw, 2015). This moment in gaming history highlights the extent to which hegemonic groups within gaming culture pushed back against women for “politicizing” video games. GamerGate became one of the most notable controversies emphasizing the need to take game culture seriously (Mortensen, 2015). This event brought awareness to the toxicity that exists within gaming and how unwelcome women in gaming were (and still are).

Many current video games have an online component to them unlike offline video games that often require individuals to engage with other players in real time to cooperate through voice chatting or text. Although individuals may choose to not initiate or respond to other players, not all online video games provide ways to completely opt out of social interactions. Marginalized bodies face a unique challenge within these spaces, since they cannot hide their race, gender, sexuality, or other aspects of their identity online (Gray, 2017). Players utilizing voice chat can make determinations of who does not fall into white-straight male identities based on the sound of their voice (Gray, 2012a). This linguistic profiling can often lead to racist, homophobic, and sexist comments from players. This inability to remain completely anonymous online leads to marginalized

bodies to experience inequality in online gaming environments due to their identities (Gray, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2016; Ortiz, 2018, 2019).

Researchers worked to understand negative behaviors in online gaming spaces (Kwak, Blackburn, & Han., 2015; Shores et al., 2014) that are also known as toxic behaviors (Kwak et al., 2015; Consalvo, 2012; Gray, 2017; Myers, 2007; Warner & Raiter, 2005). Some toxic behaviors take the form of racist, sexist, homophobic, and other forms of oppressive language and acts that target specific marginalized identities (Gray, 2014, 2016). Ortiz (2018) argues that trash talking that occurs in gaming between players reproduces racism and sexism. Gray (2014) argues that video game players use linguistic profiling to identify which players do not fall within traditional white-male identities. These toxic behaviors create additional challenges for marginalized individuals online since toxic behaviors target individuals with marginalized identities (Consalvo, 2012; Gray, 2014, 2017). This further illuminates the claim that a person cannot simply strip their identities away when entering online gaming spaces.

Online video game environments can be toxic, but general digital spaces also provide marginalized bodies opportunities to explore and express their identities in new ways. Anonymity online allows users an opportunity to express themselves differently than they would offline (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Gray, 2017). Character creation in video games can provide players to experiment with identity, such as gender (Griffith, 2003). Queer gamers also may find opportunities to reveal or explore sexual identities (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Gray, 2017). Online spaces and offline gaming have provided individuals opportunity to explore their identity, but there is little known on how identity exploration may look within online gaming environments.

Coping and Resisting in Online Gaming Spaces

Scholars have noted multiple impacts on marginalized individuals when faced with discrimination in offline spaces. Mental health and self-esteem are negatively impacted for individuals who have experienced discrimination in offline spaces (Lowe, Okubo, & Reilly, 2012; Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2012; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Striken, 2012). Online experiences of racial discrimination have yielded similar problems in addition to impact on identity acceptance (Tynes, Giang, Williams, & Thompson, 2008). Online homophobia has been shown to also increase internalized homophobia and shame experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals (Bobbe, 2002; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 2002; Weber-Gilmore, Rose, & Rubinstein, 2011).

Coping strategies have been developed by historically underrepresented individuals in order to mitigate the amount of discrimination faced. Marginalized people tend to segregate themselves from larger gaming communities and carve out “safe spaces” for themselves (Gray, 2011, 2017). Men of color report becoming desensitized and offer newcomers the most effective strategies for dealing with racist trash talk in online gaming (Ortiz, 2019). This newly developing research on strategies marginalized individuals utilize within online gaming spaces requires deeper understanding of experiences to learn about how individuals’ identities influence these decisions and actions.

Real Virtuality

Gaming spaces are not entirely separate from offline spaces (Gray, 2017; Nakamura, 2012). This concept is emphasized by critical gaming scholars in recognizing that what is real cannot be determined by the location (offline or online) of the

experience. As explained by Castells (1996), as technology increasingly becomes integrated into our daily lives as a form to communicate and engage, the ‘real’, daily lives of people are “captured, fully immersed in a virtual setting [...] in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience” (p 373). Castells (1996) refers to this new culture as a culture of real virtuality. Video game players experience this hybrid existence of being both offline and online in multiple contexts. Additionally, players can engage in multiple online gaming spaces simultaneously (e.g. in-game and Discord).

Current Events

COVID-19

COVID-19 is a newly infectious disease that began to spread globally in early 2020. While most people infected will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover with little to no special treatment, older individuals and those with underlying medical conditions are at higher risk to develop more serious and chronic illnesses (CDC, 2021). Additionally, infection symptoms varied where some individuals infected may show no symptoms initially while still spreading the virus to others. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) advised individuals to avoid gatherings or unnecessary contact with people outside the immediate household due to COVID-19 virus spreading primarily through airborne transmissions. The spread of the virus resulted in drastic changes in day to day living across the globe. Most jobs and schools turned virtual with the use of Zoom and online mediums to complete work. Furthermore, most spaces for social or recreational gatherings were closed.

In-home data usage in the first month of these closing resulted in an 18% increase (Clement, 2021). Additionally, weekly data usage for online gaming increased by 75% compared to March of 2019 (Clement, 2021). Media and technology usage increased as a way to connect and socialize with friends and family due to restrictions across the globe. Many individuals began engaging in online gaming spaces more frequently in order to connect with others and meet their social needs.

These restrictions also placed unique challenges to this dissertation process. Firstly, no interviews could be completed in person. Additionally, due to the increased amount of time spent online due to adjustments in work, from in-person to online work, and inability to comfortably leave their homes, fatigue from being online became a barrier for future connections with participants.

Racial (in)Justice

Although racial injustice and the Black Lives Matter movement are not new, 2020 was met with an increase in activism and awareness of police brutality against Black men and women in the United States. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. Priscilla Slater. Marvin Scott III. Duante Wright. These are only a few of the names of Black men and women who were killed by either police or a citizen since 2020. Marches and protests were actively occurring during summer of 2020 and beyond. Additionally, discourse surrounding social-political events were becoming more common within online gaming spaces. Speaking out against police brutality and support of Black Lives Matter became a point of controversy within the gaming sphere. While many Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) were vocal on the need for gaming companies to show their stance on these issues, many other, predominately white, gamers pushed back on putting “politics

in gaming.” Some gaming companies and developers such as Nintendo, Sony, Microsoft, Naughty Dog, and Respawn made public statements in support of the BLM movement. However, many activists within the online gaming space critiqued companies for being performative since these companies did not address their toxic communities that actively perpetuate racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression.

Statement of the Problem

Video games continue to have a growing diverse audience. Despite this, online gaming environments continue to privilege and center white-maleness both in terms of their development and assumptions made by players about who is on the other side of the screen. Marginalized bodies cannot discard their identities when entering online gaming spaces (Gray, 2017; Shaw, 2012). Due to the necessity for individuals to communicate in online gaming, marginalized bodies often face overt forms of racism, sexism, and homophobia through linguistic profiling and trash talk (Gray 2012a, 2012b, 2017; Ortiz, 2019).

Perceived discrimination offline has been shown to impact individuals’ self-esteem, mental health, and identity development (Tynes, Umana-Taylor, Rose, Lin, & Anderson, 2012; Umaña-Taylor, Tynes, Toomey, Williams, & Mitchell, 2015). These acts of discrimination in online gaming take the form of toxic behavior such as linguistic profiling and trash talk and are often targeted against individuals with marginalized identities. Digital scholars have explored aspects of how marginalized bodies experience online gaming spaces (Gray, 2012a, 2012b, 2015; Ortiz, 2018, 2019), but less attention has been given to understanding how these environments influence identity and identity development (Gray, 2017). Few research studies have committed to integrating online

contexts to understanding identity development (Wangqvist & Frisen, 2016) and less so to how online gaming environments influence identity and identity development (Gray, 2017). Although Gray (2017) has focused on identity representations within Xbox Live virtual contexts, a component of the online gaming community, this is only a portion of online gaming environments.

Marginalized bodies have developed coping strategies to resist and persist within offline oppressive environments. Within online gaming spaces, marginalized bodies have been shown to carve out their own spaces in the margins of the gaming community (Gray, 2012a) or become desensitized to racism from other players (Ortiz, 2019). These coping strategies provide insight on actions marginalized bodies take in order to exist within online gaming spaces, but little is known on how identities play a role in these decisions.

Black Cyberfeminist Theory

Black cyberfeminism acknowledges inequities that exist in gaming and that online experiences are not separate from offline experiences, but rather an extension of them (Richard & Gray, 2018). Black cyberfeminism recognizes the ways in which forms of oppression persist within online gaming environment and the ways in which video gaming spaces have been built and maintained actively work to privilege dominant voices—specifically white, heterosexual, male—and stories (Gray, 2017; Richard & Gray, 2018).

Black cyberfeminism works to privilege the intersections of identities and voices of historically underrepresented individuals existing in digital spaces. Black cyberfeminism operates under the following tenets: (1) social structural oppression of

technology and virtual spaces; (2) intersecting oppressions experienced in virtual spaces; and (3) the distinctness of the virtual feminist community. A Black Cyberfeminist lens allows for researchers to interrogate how, specifically, Black women understand their oppressed statuses and make sense of these experiences within digital spaces (Gray, 2015, 2017). The initial development of Black Cyberfeminism was to give needed attention to the unique experiences of Black women in digital spaces. Although my participants do not fall within these specific intersections, Black cyberfeminism provides intentional attention to identity and the social structural components of technology that other digital frameworks currently do not capture. Moreover, aspects of privilege, marginalization, and access remain as components to explore since toxic masculinity, homophobia, transphobia, and racism impact all individuals within online gaming spaces, albeit in unique ways.

Purpose of Study

Growing research has illuminated various ways that social interactions taking place in online video games have perpetuated the erasure and oppression of players with marginalized identities (Brock, 2011; Downs and Smith, 2016; Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007; Mou & Peng, 2009; Nakamura, 1995; Shaw & Friesem, 2016). In recent years, researchers have gradually shifted their focus from the content of video games to the individuals who navigate and are uniquely impacted in these online gaming spaces (Fox & Tang, 2017; Gray, 2012a, 2012b, 2017; Ortiz, 2019). Women and people of color face various forms of racism and sexism at the hands of their opponents and teammates in online video games and have been observed reacting to these oppressions by either creating spaces to mitigate the impact or enduring silently (Gray, 2012a, 2012b, 2017;

Ortiz, 2019). The impact on one's identity as one makes sense of these experiences and the role identity plays in taking actions to navigate these spaces is less understood. This study worked to deepen our understanding of the experiences of historically underrepresented individuals, specifically, Queer Black and Latinx masculine identifying individuals, in online gaming spaces and to provide insight on how identity is impacted by these experiences and influences decisions.

An additional focus of this study was to broaden the scope of what are considered by researchers to be "real" and impactful experiences. Our physical selves are not left behind when we enter virtual spaces (Gray, 2012a, 2012b, 2017). Neither are the identities that accompany and are embodied within our physical bodies. A Black Cyberfeminist approach emphasizes the importance that conceptualizations of 'lived experience' include experiences existing in both online and offline spaces (Richard & Gray, 2018). As an extension, the impacts of those experiences are carried with the individual from online to offline spaces and vice versa. This additional focus allowed for a deepening of our understanding of how individuals reach out and access supports in offline settings in response to online experiences and, conversely, in online settings in response to offline experiences.

Reason for Qualitative

The focus on the lived experiences and meaning-making of Queer Black and Latinx masculine identifying video game players make a qualitative approach relevant for deepening understanding of the uniqueness of these experiences (Creswell, 2013). Narrative inquiry was used in order to understand how individuals construct their

understanding of their experiences. Stories provide us an avenue to make sense of our experiences and understand the world around us.

Narratives are situated within social, historical and cultural contexts and can deepen our understanding about identity (Riessman, 2003). Narrative inquiry provided participants freedom and control in how they shared their stories and experiences. Furthermore, narrative allowed for marginalized individuals to reclaim their voices (Amoah, 1997), empower participants, and challenge dominant ideologies (Rodriguez, 2006). Stories can challenge master narratives and work to disrupt discourses that suppress historically underrepresented individuals (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Valuable data from participants goes beyond the measurement of variables and provides a deeper understanding of the how's, what's, and whys. Thematic analysis allowed for in-depth descriptions to surface within participant stories as well (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With much of the scholarship focused on gaming culture or quantifying types of behaviors, attention must be given to how individuals perceive and experience these online gaming spaces.

Research Questions

This study addressed two primary research questions.

Research Question 1: How do experiences within online gaming environments impact the identity of Queer Black and Latinx masculine identifying individuals, and how are identities impacted by online gaming experiences in those environments?

A primary focus of this research question was to obtain understanding about the ways online gaming experiences influence how marginalized individuals understand their identities. To address this research question, I developed interview questions that elicit

narratives about the experiences related to online gaming spaces that did, or did not, influence the identities of historically underrepresented individuals.

Previous research suggested that online environments provide individuals with opportunities to explore and experiment with components of their identity (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Gray, 2017), but studies focused on online spaces rather than specifically online gaming spaces. Gray's (2017) exploration of identity in online gaming spaces focused on Xbox Live, a piece of online gaming environments as a whole. My intent was to understand how the impact or influence on identity may change for individuals in different or multiple online gaming spaces.

Research Question 2: How do identity and lived experiences influence actions within online gaming environments?

This question aimed to understand how identity influences the actions taken by historically underrepresented individuals (e.g. creating community, warning others, segregating self from larger community, etc.). Current research has provided insight on coping strategies used by historically underrepresented individuals in online spaces (Gray, 2017; Ortiz, 2019), but less is known on how identity influences this process. Additionally, with the acknowledgement that offline and online experiences are not separate from each other (Gray, 2017), understanding how offline coping strategies are utilized to mitigate experiences of oppression was beneficial to understand.

Significance of the Study

There is a call to action for digital game research to shift its focus from game narratives and development to the experiences of those engaging within these digital worlds (Leonard, 2015; Nakamura, 2013). Previous scholars have focused on how

gaming environments and culture have perpetuated forms of power and oppression through identity erasure and discriminatory toxic behavior from other players (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014; Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015; Cote, 2015; Mou & Peng, 2009; Nakamura, 2012). Further attention needs to be given of the voices of participants who are impacted by these actions. This study aimed to amplify already existing voices within these spaces.

There is a continued growth in the number of opportunities in terms of funding and careers through gaming. Competitive gaming, known as e-sports, is a growing industry with various opportunities including players and coaches (Pizzo, Jones, & Funk, 2019). Many colleges throughout the United States have integrated e-Sports teams through with opportunities for scholarships for individuals whose video gaming skills are at competitive levels (NACE, 2019). This inquiry provided insight in ways which historically underrepresented individuals navigate successfully to create ways to increase access to these resources as well as provide recommendations to create more equitable opportunities.

Counseling professionals are bound to work with more clients who play video games considering the number of individuals who engage in video gaming and online video game environments continues to increase (Cade & Gates, 2017). Counselor awareness of how video games play an important role for some individuals becomes important in how we work with clients and our willingness to explore. By understanding the experiences of historically underrepresented individuals in online gaming environments, we as counselors can be more aware of how these spaces may or may not provide clients with support.

Counselors and counselor educators are continuously working towards multicultural competency. Part of this growth requires us to understand how power, privilege, and oppression may take many forms and the impact these forms of oppression have. Leonard (2006) explains video games provide a medium to both teach and inform those who engage with them about themselves and the world around them—including the perpetuation of negative stereotypes found within games. Understanding how gaming culture has a history of hegemonic ideology and ways historically underrepresented individuals experience online gaming environments are becoming critical in working effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds who engage with online gaming environments.

Limitations

It is important to note the limitations of this study. First, participants who are interviewed may discuss and frame their experiences in ways that they believe I wanted to hear. Another limitation is the generalizability of results due to purposeful criteria sampling. Findings from this study can not be generalizable to all historically underrepresented video game players. Individuals who do not fall into the criteria set for sampling may not find the results of this study reflective of their experiences. Additionally, with the various online video games available, experiences of participants may not generalize to all online video games.

A last important limitation to this research is tied to recruitment or participants and sampling strategy. The interview procedure takes time from participants. There were no incentives currently for individuals to commit to time requirements. This leaves potential for participants to drop out if time-commitments become conflicting.

Definition of Terms

The following terms have been defined in order to increase the clarity of what I am researched:

Identity

Identity is complex and unique for each individual in how they understand and express who they are. Additionally, identity is intersectional, interconnected, layered, and operate in complex relationships with each other (Gines, 2011). Meaning, aspects of one's identity do not exist separately of one another. Varying combinations of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and other identities impact how an individual navigates the world and is positioned within environmental and social contexts (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Identity develops through exploration and commitment and for some identities can be seen as fluid (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Although labels can be helpful in understanding identities, scholars stress the importance of allowing individuals to define the labels they use (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2009).

Online Gaming Space

The original scope of this research understood online gaming spaces to reference in-game environments. This would include actual gameplay and menu screens where in-chat and voice comms could be utilized. In learning with participants in how they understood and engaged with online gaming, I came to recognize that interactions and experiences extend beyond just in-game interactions. Participants discussed Discord and Twitch as online gaming spaces that overlapped with in-game social spaces.

Discord. *Discord* is a free to use voice, video, and text chat app. Servers can be private or open. Individuals can create their own private server and invite friends to join

using an invite link. Many video game players use this app to communicate while playing games in order to avoid in-game chat while still maintaining communication. Many *Twitch* streamers also create private *Discords* for their communities to hang out in and create deeper relationships with each other.

Twitch. *Twitch* is a live streaming service. While it was originally focused on video game live streaming, this platform has expanded its categories beyond gaming to include topics such as music, politics, creative content (e.g. art, music, video editing). Users of this platform are either streamers (people who live stream their game play), viewers, or both. *Twitch* has an emphasis on real-time interactions. Viewers may primarily chat with streamers through the platforms text chat. Streamers can respond to their chat and engage in conversations with their viewers through this method. Streamers have opportunities to earn money from viewers as they grow the communities and supporters.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review was two-fold: a) provide insight on how gaming and online spaces have centered whiteness and masculinity and b) understand how online spaces have been experienced by marginalized individuals and utilized in exploring and understanding identity development. Research suggests that people of color, women, and sexual minorities experience unique challenges due to their race, gender and sexual orientation (Gray, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2016; Ortiz, 2018, 2019). Thus, to better grasp the identities of marginalized individuals in online gaming spaces, I have reviewed research that creates an understanding of the distinctive experiences that marginalized individuals are faced with in online gaming spaces.

Online gaming spaces perpetuate social inequities and discriminatory acts towards non-white, non-male individuals. Beginning with a review of literature on cultural representations in video games will provide a foundational understanding of how video games have upheld and centered whiteness and masculinity. This foundation is critical in understanding the environment of online gaming spaces that marginalized bodies are surrounded by.

I will then evaluate research about women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ individuals in online spaces to promote understanding about their experiences and about the theories and methods used to study this unique group of students. Due to the scarcity of research on this specific topic, I first broadly discuss general research that focuses on marginalized bodies in online spaces. I then narrow in on research that has focused specifically on identity development of marginalized individuals in online spaces.

I then discuss Black Cyberfeminist theory that will be utilized in this study. My description of Black Cyberfeminist theory covered the main concepts within the theory and how they relate to my research focus.

Gaming Culture and Environment

Video games have historically lacked diverse characters within video games and, when diverse characters are included, perpetuate stereotypes surrounding marginalized groups. Video game scholars note how video game spaces are primarily made by and for males as well as being equally White-centered (Leonard, 2016, Mou & Peng, 2009). Hegemony of play refers to the ways that the digital game industry has reinforced through technological, commercial, and cultural investments the influence of the dominant global culture (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007). Despite the increased participation of diverse individuals, game production and textual content reflect dominant white, male culture (Leonard, 2009; Nakamura 2013; Shaw, 2012).

Diversity and Representation in Gaming

Playable and lead characters in games are an example of what identities are mostly reflected within video games. Mou and Peng (2009) examined the representation of female and racial minority characters in video games using game trailers, introductory sequences, and game covers of the top 20 most popular video games at the time. All leading characters were male. Of these, 74% of leading characters were white. The remaining leading characters were Black and from a basketball game. No other racial representation deviated from Black or white lead characters within this analysis. Racial and gender diversity appeared in support roles of characters, however, majority of characters in game were both white and male. Additionally, female characters were

shown to be significantly more sexualized than male characters. Mou and Peng (2009) argue the representation and portrayal of female and racial minority characters can have significant impacts on adolescent players due to the importance of identity exploration and self-understanding during this time period. This focus on adolescent players, although relevant, ignores the impact these portrayals may have on older video game players as they learn how to orient themselves in online gaming spaces.

Shaw and Friesem (2016) utilized a grounded theoretical approach to classify LGBTQ content in more than 300 games. Researchers aimed to not only provide an overview of sexuality as other scholars have identified (Consalvo, 2003, Conn, 2015), but also expand the scope to address transgender, nonbinary, and or genderqueer representation and content. Shaw and Friesem identified the following themes: character sexuality, character gender, relationships/romance/sex, actions, and queer game/narrative. Shaw and Freisem (2016) report PCs (playable characters) are rarely explicitly have a sexual orientation and even less PCs represent explicitly transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and intersex characters. Even when characters are in non-heterosexual romantic and sexual relationships in games, it is difficult to know actual sexuality of characters since romantic interest or sexual partner is not sufficient evidence of identifying as a specific sexual identity. Games that are explicit with sexual and gender diversity are rare and primarily developed by LGBTQ creators. Another important finding was the casual use of homophobia and transphobia in game texts and character dialogues. With the consistent amount of LGBTQ discrimination just within this focus of on LGBTQ content, Shaw and Freisem (2016) discussed how integrated homophobia and transphobia persist in games with non-LGBTQ content.

Representations of marginalized groups within gaming also take hyper-sexualized forms. Downs and Smith (2010) examined male and female sexuality in 60 video games through a content analysis. Their purpose was to assess the prevalence of overt sexuality in video game characters. Findings indicate that female characters were underrepresented in games in comparison to males. Female characters were significantly more likely to be shown partially nude, wearing sexually revealing clothing, and featured with unrealistic bodies when represented. Researchers suggest the use of sexual content in video games may be used to bring in adult male players-the assumed “most avid game player.” Downs and Smith (2010) warn about how repeated exposure to these unrealistic depictions of women may reinforce ideas and beliefs about women and womanhood.

Videogames have continued to depict cultures and cultural characters in insensitive and stereotypical ways. Brock (2011) explains how the capability for video games to display realistic environments, realistic human expression, and complex narratives provides opportunity to perpetuate certain beliefs about race and ethnicity, which can extend to other marginalized groups. White male protagonists are often in a role to conquer, explore, and exploit. Brock (2011) highlights how in *Resident Evil* games, Spanish and African cultures have been used as hosts to the games’ “virus” with White protagonists working to eradicate the parasites (i.e. Spanish and African zombies). These representations of marginalized bodies as violent in videogames can reproduce ideologies such as fear of Black masculinity (Leonard, 2006).

Hypermasculine ideologies within game play also can be seen in how some people view female video game players. A study by Fox and Tang (2014) aimed to understand how personality traits, demographic variables, and levels of game play

predicted sexist attitudes towards women. Of 301 participants, 220 were men and 75 were women. Masculine norms were described as a desire for power over female video game players and need for heterosexual self-presentation. These masculine norms predicted higher scores on the Video Game Sexism Scale. Findings suggest increased numbers of men dominating video game spaces and lack of consequences contribute to these held masculine ideologies. It would be valuable for researchers to identify how other identities, such as race and sexual orientation are oppressed within these spaces as well.

Impacts of Lack of Representation

Representation in the media can work as a mirror for existing social forces in offline settings (Anderson, 2002). Negative media portrayal of marginalized groups on television has been shown to also impact how people perceive marginalized groups in society. Mastro, Behm-Morawitz and Ortiz (2007) explored the relationship between television portrayals of Latinos and real-world perceptions of Latinos in the U.S. Findings suggest negative perceptions of Latinos on TV, such as criminality, were significantly associated with evaluations of Latino criminality in society.

LGBTQIA+ individuals are similarly often exposed to stereotypical, heterosexist, homophobic, and/or limited representations of sexual minorities in media (Davis, 2008; Raley & Lucas, 2006). McInroy and Craig (2015) utilized a grounded theory approach to explore how LGBTQIA+ individuals perceive LGBTQIA+ media representation. Participants report LGBTQIA+ characters are often one-dimensional stereotypes or have little impact on the overall story. The presence of LGBTQIA+ characters in media, even when one-dimensional, was validating for participants.

Negative images in media have also been shown to impact racial identity. Accepting negative stereotypes has been shown to negatively impact identity and self-esteem (Gordon, 2008; Ward, 2004). Less is known about what factors mitigate internalizing negative stereotypes. Adams-Bass, Stevenson, and Kotzin (2014) utilized focus groups and a questionnaire to understand how Black adolescents perceive images of Black people on TV and in magazines as well as assess their beliefs from seeing these images. Findings suggest racial socialization and Black history knowledge influence how Black adolescents interpret Black media images. Racial socialization and Black history knowledge also appeared to influence the types of media Black adolescents viewed. Youth who received more affirming racial socialization messages appear to identify more negative and positive stereotypes and less likely to then internalize these messages.

Several researchers have highlighted the lack of representation in video games, but there is still a lack of research understanding how this lack of representation impacts individuals who play games. Passmore, Birk, and Mandryk (2018) explored how marginalized players perceive underrepresentation, experience the existing representations and their beliefs about diversity in gaming using a mixed-methods approach. Survey results suggested white players perceive there is enough racial diversity in gaming significantly more than Black or Hispanic players. White players reported believing that digital games accurately represent their race more than Black, Asian, or Hispanic players. Of 41.9% of participants describing experiences of discrimination, 37.9% of discrimination was in the form of experiences racism. Furthermore, 82.8% of all discrimination coded identified development and/or industry at the source of racism through stereotypical game characters, misrepresentations, tokenism, and demeaning

narratives. Findings in this study also suggest people of color who play games are aware of racism and discrimination in digital games. This study provided unique insights in that it not only provided information on how racial minorities experience online spaces but also gave attention to how individuals perceive the environment of digital games. This methodology provided opportunities for participant short answers to be shared, but utilizing a qualitative focused methodology can provide a more in-depth understanding of these experiences and perceptions.

Advocating for Change

Marginalized groups, specifically women, have voiced the need for diverse representation gaming. This has been met with pushback from other video game players, primarily white men. Braithwaite (2014) provides insights to ways in which online gaming communities can be seen as embedded in larger cultural contexts and demonstrates how gaming communities maintain power differentials. Braithwaite (2014) utilized a critical analysis in examining debates in public forums centered on an in-game change to a character who greeted players in gendered and sexist ways. Feminist as killjoy and anxious masculinity were identified themes. Braithwaite (2014) comments on the ways in which video games and, by extension, their associated communities treat feminism and feminists as threats and ridiculed when addressing discrimination occurring within gaming. This study provides insights in how marginalized groups are met with resistance from other community members when working to shift gaming culture.

The inclusion or exclusion of diverse characters, objectives in game, and hyper-sexualization/fetishization of marginalized groups are ways the industry has perpetuated stereotypes and reinforced power differentials in gaming (Mou & Peng, 2009; Fron, et

al., 2007; Nakamura, 1995). The active insulation of these forms of harassment within online gaming spaces and resistance for change creates unique challenges for marginalized bodies. Dominant narratives and ideologies shape the culture and beliefs of a group of individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2002). These beliefs can then be manifested into forms of discrimination towards marginalized bodies known as toxic behavior.

Toxic Behavior

The unique aspect of real-time interactions with other players in online gaming provides another avenue for dominant groups to discriminate against marginalized bodies. Although diversity of individuals who play video games increase, there is strong evidence that players who are not straight, White, male face harassment from other players online (Cote, 2017; Gray, 2014; Nakamura, 2012). Negative interactions with other players, known as toxic behaviors, often take the form of racist, sexist, and homophobic hate-speech and behaviors (Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015). Harassment in online gaming is increased within online gaming due to the prevalence of trash talk (Cote, 2017; Ortiz 2019).

A popular form of toxic behavior in online spaces is griefing, which is the intentional harassment of other players within the game (Warner & Raiter, 2005; Myers, 2007). Blackburn and Kwak (2014) report that roughly 25% of calls to gaming customer support lines are calls about griefing. Tactics in griefing are aimed at distracting other players from accomplishing the goals of the game. Warner and Raiter (2005) provide an example of griefing through the game World of Warcraft (WoW), a popular fantasy Massively-Multiplayer Role Playing Game (MMRPG). Some players would use a spell that killed lower level players and, like a plague, the spell would spread to other

characters. This would ruin progress for surviving players but also destroy the hard work they had previously put in. Other examples of griefing include: friendly fire; blocking players from resources; trapping teammates; and playing in lower tier levels than the players' actual level. In summary, griefing is intentionally using game mechanics to harass other players to make the game unplayable.

A study by Kwak, Blackburn, and Han (2015) explored the impacts of toxic behavior in team competition games, specifically *League of Legends*. In this study, at least one form of toxic behavior (e.g. assisting enemy team, offensive language, verbal abuse, etc.) was witnessed per game. Players in *League of Legends* did not actively report toxic players although being aware of the toxic behavior. Teammates were less likely to submit reports on toxic behavior than opponents even when witnessing teammates engaging in these behaviors. This suggests that although individuals in online gaming environments are aware of the toxic behavior of other members, teammates and opposing players are more likely to remain bystanders. Individuals who hold more privileged identities may not see discriminatory forms of toxic behavior as problematic which reducing the likelihood of discriminatory behavior being addressed.

Trash talk is considered a normal component of online gaming and is often perceived as ignorable by video game players. When players react negatively to trash talk, they are seen as taking it too seriously (Cote, 2017). Trash talk is actively defended due to being identified as an inevitable aspect of videogame culture despite often taking the form of racist, sexist, and homophobic rhetoric (Nakamura, 2012).

Online Gaming Experiences

Online games represent the myth where people believe interactions on online game spaces cannot have a “real” impact because they do not take place in the “real world” (Fox & Tang, 2017). Gray (2015; 2017) explains how marginalized bodies cannot strip away their physical bodies when they engage in online spaces. Women, people of color, and other historically underrepresented individuals take with them identities that are subject to punishment for not conforming to the assumed White, male identity. The gamer on the other side of the screen is often assumed to be white, straight, and male unless proven otherwise (Paassen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017; Shaw, 2012; Williams, et al., 2009; Kolko, 2000). Marginalized individuals face harassment within online gaming spaces when identified as not part of the White, male majority.

Harassment

Technological advancements in video games have provided video game players ways to identify which video game players are from marginalized groups. Gray (2012b) utilized virtual ethnography to explore how marginalized bodies, specifically African American men, are othered within Xbox Live. Findings suggest experiences of racism occur through questioning, provoking, and instigating. In what can begin as general trash talk leads to racialized trash talk by determining the race of other individuals. The following excerpt from Gray (2012b) provides insights on how interactions between individuals follow the process of questioning, provoking, and instigating:

NewbSlayer: They got your ass with that torque. Right in the face. That’s the same thing I’m going to do to you. You fucking Newb (Speaking in Standard American English)

silentassassin321: Whateva man. Shut the fuck up.

NewbSlayer: Wait. Are you black?

silentassassin321: Why? Are you white?

(xxRobotechxx dies and enters the room)

xxRobotechxx: Man dats some bullshit. Fifty fucking shots. Fake bullets. I gotta have fake bullets.

NewbSlayer: Is that another fucking nigger? I'm gonna kill your black nigger asses.

xxRobotechxx: What the fuck man? Here we go wit dis shit. Get yo' white ass out dis room. Let me boot his ass.

silentassassin321: Get yo' short dick out the room. Fucking honky.

NewbSlayer: Your mom sucks nigger dick. Nigger Nigger Nigger (NewbSlayer leaves the room) (TubeTastic101 leaves the room)

silentassassin321: Got dayum I get tired'a dat shit. Fucking white short dick honkey.

xxRobotechxx: I see they bringing dat shit to Gears. Wish dey would keep dat fuck shit in Call fa' Duty (p. 267-268)

This excerpt highlights non-unique interactions that happen often to people of color in online gaming spaces. Participants discuss the use of the n-word in online gaming spaces has been weaponized towards marginalized gamers. White individuals who use the n-word were also shown to argue how the use of the word online holds no “real meaning” which ignores the historical context of the word and normalizes the use of it in online gaming spaces.

Experiences of discrimination become more complex and unique when looking at individuals who hold multiple marginalized identities. An ethnographic study by Gray (2012a) shed light on how women of color experience Xbox Live. Findings suggest video game players use linguistic profiling to identify which players do not fall into white, straight, male identities. Latina women experienced racism, nativism, and sexism. African-American women experienced racialized sexism due to the intersection of two marginalized identities. Experiences of racism were also a normal part of interacting with groups of only women. Participants in the study responded to these acts of racism and sexism by separating from the larger gaming community and carving out their own spaces through developing new communities. Participants share how these communities have provided a space to not feel alone and understood.

Individuals may still internalize stereotypes that have been perpetuated within online gaming environments regardless of reporting these experiences. Fortim and de Moura Grando (2013) explored the perceptions of Brazilian female players regarding self-identification as women in Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) games. 120 participants self-identifying females participated in this study. Participants who report playing as a female avatar reveal overall pleasant experiences, however, 59% report either aggressive behavior (23%) or romantic advances (36%) from other players. An interesting finding within this study was that although 80% participants report being mostly welcomed by male players in these games, 43.5% believe other players relate failure/making mistakes to their gender. This suggests that although players are not being directly marginalized, internal stereotypes of how their identity may be portrayed due to their behavior is still internalized.

Impacts of Discrimination

Researchers have shown the multiple impacts on individuals who experience forms of discrimination. Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, and Rasmus (2012) examined the relationship between racial microaggressions and mental health. Surveys collected from 506 participants suggest higher frequencies of microaggressions were significantly correlated with negative affect and depressive symptoms. Although results show no significant results in differences in the amount of microaggressions experienced by people of color, results suggest that the types of microaggressions experienced may vary by race. For example, Black and Latinx participants may experience more inferiority-related acts than Asian participants.

Self-esteem is also negatively impacted by microaggressions. A survey study by Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, and Striken (2014) investigated the relationship between racial microaggressions and self-esteem of 225 college students. Results suggest that the more racial microaggressions experienced the lower individual reports self-esteem. Black and Latinx participants also report being treated as inferiors within academia.

Qualitative research can provide in-depth understandings of experiences and center the voices of individuals. Although focused on experiences of racism and other forms of oppression, a qualitative study by Lowe, Okubo, and Reilly (2012) shed light on important impacts that these forms of discrimination can have on marginalized individuals in offline environments. Results suggest that racism gives rise to symptoms of trauma. Participants also share the ways they attained support, such as confiding in others, also risked receiving feedback that invalidated and minimized their experiences with racism.

Online racial discrimination has also been shown to impact marginalized individuals. Tynes, Giang, Williams, and Thompson (2008) surveyed 264 high school students to examine associations between racial discrimination online and psychological adjustment. Results show 71% of African American and 67% of multiracial/other adolescents report witnessing racial discrimination online. 29% of African American report experiencing direct discrimination. Findings suggest discrimination experienced online can trigger negative emotional responses, which can lead to feelings of anxiety and depression.

Research on the impacts of homophobia yield similar results to racial discrimination. Experiences of homophobia can also lead LGBTQIA+ individuals to accept homophobic and anti-gay attitudes about sexual orientations (Weber-Gilmore, Rose, & Rubinstein, 2011). This internalized homophobia can result in LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing low self-esteem, shame, depression, anxiety, and higher rates of stress (Bobbe, 2002; D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Rowen & Malcolm, 2003). Homophobia and internalized homophobia can impact the coming out process for LGB individuals. Results of a survey study by Weber-Gilmore and colleagues (2011) suggest internalized homophobia is a predictor for willingness to be open of sexuality to friends, colleagues, and extended family.

Less is known on how the impacts of discrimination experienced in online gaming are similar or differ. It is also not uncommon for individuals to perceive acts of discrimination in online gaming spaces to be “real” threats (Ortiz, 2019). It would be beneficial to understand not only the impacts of discrimination in online gaming spaces, but also how marginalized individuals perceive the “real” impact of these behaviors.

Coping Strategies

Historically underrepresented individuals actively work to find ways to mitigate the impacts of the harassment they face in online gaming spaces. Fox and Tang (2017) surveyed women on their experiences with general and sexual harassment in online video games. Five identified coping strategies were employed by women in online gaming spaces such as gender masking, avoidance, denial, and seeking help. Experiencing general and sexual harassment would lead to women withdrawing from online games for various periods of time as well. Sexual harassment would lead to rumination of these experiences. Some participants report avoiding games that include an interactive component with other video game players in order to avoid some of these environments that require game chats and potentially experiencing forms of harassment.

Using a grounded-theory approach, Cote (2017) explored women's strategies for coping with online game-related harassment. Cote (2017) drew upon 37 in-depth interviews with self-identified female gamers. Findings suggest five harassment management strategies used by participants: leaving online gaming, avoiding strangers, camouflaging gender, emphasizing skills, and assuming more aggressive personalities. Twenty-five of the participants identified as White. This leaves lack of understanding on how women of color may develop differing strategies.

Learning to not respond to these incidents has become a form of coping for some marginalized groups. Results from a study by Ortiz (2019) suggest men of color gradually become more desensitized from actively experiencing racist trash talk in online gaming environments. Some participants share how speaking in a different language in online games has led to being insulted by racist slurs based on their perceived race. These

experiences align with findings from Gray (2012) in how players use linguistic profiling to determine who does not fall within the stereotypical white-male video game player identities. Participants in Ortiz (2019) study share how the construction of their avatars can potentially alert other gamers that they were not White. In terms of coping, participants share although being impacted when these incidents were new to experience, many shared being “desensitized” to it after experiencing it almost daily for years in these online gaming spaces. Some participants also share actively working to not react to not seem “crazy.”

Clans and communities in online gaming spaces have been seen as a protective factor for marginalized individuals. A study by Richard and Hoadley (2013) focused on the relationship between online gaming communities and experience in game culture. Researchers looked at the experiences of gamers in gaming clans to see if clans serve as a protective space for vulnerable players. Findings suggest that players in gender-supportive clans are more likely to identify with gaming. Future studies would benefit from understanding how the inclusion of intersecting identities impact how individuals determine which identity-supportive groups to participate in.

Discussion of Research about Identity in Online Spaces

In this section I will discuss and critique research that has focused exclusively on identity development of marginalized individuals. Due to the scarcity of research focused on identity development in online gaming spaces, I will also examine studies exploring identity develop in offline spaces and general digital spaces. Most quantitative studies focus on one specific aspect of identity. Some qualitative studies addressed identity development within institutional contexts that influence identity. The following studies

provide important information, but also promote the need for qualitative research to further explore findings in their study.

Ghabrial (2017) utilized semi-structured interviews to better understand LGBTQ-POC experiences with identity, community, discrimination and health. Eleven participants were interviewed and asked to fill out an identity salience survey to think about their identities and relationship between them. Main themes identified included feeling disconnected from communities, identity relationships, coming out, and stress and anxiety in the LGBTQ-POC community. Two participants shared part of the disconnect from the LGBTQ community they felt is due to the media often portraying cis-White gay men with no other diversity. Several participants also reported feeling non-included to their racial community due to their sexuality. These findings suggested that while we consider the ways we represent marginalized groups; we must also consider how representing one identity marker may continue to exclude some experiences.

Online spaces can provide queer or questioning individuals to reveal or explore sexual identities in safe and anonymous ways (Craig & McInroy, 2014). This study included websites, web-based TV, web-based news, social media, and social networking included within online spaces. 19 interviews were analyzed through grounded theory. Findings suggest digital media provide LGBTQIA+ individuals' opportunities to: access resources, explore identity, find likeness, come out digitally, and potentially expand identities formed online into offline life. Participants identified how digital media provided access to identity-based resources.

Gray (2017) explored identity development of Black lesbians in Xbox Live. Attention was given to the ways online gaming spaces influence identity and plays a role

in community building. Ethnography and narrative analysis were utilized to explore participant experiences. Gray (2017) employed Black cyberfeminism as an analytical tool in understanding these experiences. Emerging themes included: the contentious role of anonymity, isolation and the utility of digital connectivity, and the transgressive play. One unique finding in this study was how coping strategies utilized in digital spaces by White women were not always available options for Black women. For example, “gender-masking” was not an available tool to mitigate harassment for Black women. Racial discrimination would also be faced in groups labeled as “safe” for all women. Despite experiences of harassment, participants also report feeling more connected with others online who share similar experiences. Finding other video game players of similar identities and experiences provided a form of resilience for Black and Latina women.

Evaluation of Methodological Approaches in Online Gaming Studies

Gray (2012a; 2012b) used unique qualitative methods that empowered participants in online gaming environments as an oppressive institution. Gray (2012a; 2012b) ensured voices of participants were honored and the core focus as part of the research. Being part of the gaming community also provided Gray with insights in understanding language used between video game players and games or situations often seen within gaming.

Samples from Richard and Hoadley (2013), Cote (2017), and Fox and Tang (2017) focus on one identity marker (i.e. gender) in exploring experiences. This leaves room for a deeper understanding of how additional marginalized identities (e.g. Black women) may create unique ways of coping. The provided research focused on how harassment happens and ways marginalized individuals cope with or mitigate harassment

online. Researchers and platforms also benefit from understanding the specific impacts of these behaviors.

Gray (2012a; 2012b) and Ortiz (2019) utilized alternative research methods and frameworks in order to validate the voices marginalized individuals' experiences. The use of critical race theories and attention to intersectionality allowed for the acknowledgement of the complexity of identity and the uniqueness of experiences of participants. My goal is to also create a research design that uses theory and methodology that acknowledges participants and validates their distinctive experiences within online gaming spaces. One such theoretical framework is Black Cyberfeminism.

Black Cyberfeminism

To understand the structural oppressions in digital spaces and the continued resistance by minoritized individuals with attention given to identity, Black Cyberfeminism works as an extension of Black feminist thought. Virtual feminist lens, such as Cyberfeminism and technofeminism, provide a lens to understand women and femme in technological spaces (cite). However, scholars have argued that this lens centers gender without recognizing other aspects of an individual's identities (DeCook, 2020; Wajcman, 2007). Black Cyberfeminism offers an alternative to understanding experiences and privileging the uniqueness of multiple identities interlocking by incorporating aspects of Black Feminism and specifically intersectionality.

Black Cyberfeminism expands on core tenets of Black Feminism to reflect the voices and experiences of minoritized individuals in digital spaces. Specifically, Black Cyberfeminism pulls from Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality to understand and privilege the identities of minoritized individuals. Crenshaw (1989) argued that the

discrimination faced by Black women do not neatly fit within legal categories of “racism” or “sexism,” but instead as a combination of racism and sexism. The term “intersectionality” was coined and used moving forward as a way to understand the interlocking and unique forms of oppression experienced by minoritized individuals. It recognizes that multiple oppressions are not experienced separately but instead as a single experience (Smith, 2013).

Multiple aspects of society work to oppress and “dominate” over marginalized individuals. Collins (2000) coined the concept of the matrix of domination to describe four interconnecting domains that organize power relations in society. These four domains include structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. Structural domain of power refers to the institutional component of oppression that takes the form of the social institutions that work to reproduce the subordination of Black women. Collins (2000) suggests that empowerment through this domain of power requires transformative practices. The disciplinary domain of power focuses on the organizational practices that manage power relations and control, such as policies. Empowerment for Black women in this domain requires resistance practices to come from within organizations. Through the hegemonic domain of power, old ideas that uphold oppressive systems evolve with time and become normalized. These harmful ideologies can even be endorsed and perpetuated by other marginalized groups. Empowerment here comes from active critical consciousness that works to un-learn and unpack harmful ideologies and recreate knowledge. The final domain of power, interpersonal, refers to how day to day interactions and how our conscious actions work towards empowerment or the subordination of others.

Gaming studies have also mirrored the three waves of feminist thought. First wave research focused on gendered participation in gaming (Richard & Gray, 2018). The aim of this first wave was to highlight the disparities between men and women participation in gaming and to increase the interest for women in gaming. The second wave attempted to extend on the first wave, however, perpetuated traditional stereotypes about women in gaming and centered men in the gaming space (Dickey, 2006; Richard & Gray, 2018). Additionally, this second wave ignored the interest and social barriers that women in gaming face (Richard & Gray, 2018). Moreover, both these first two waves ignored the experiences of individuals within the digital space, specifically across intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and culture.

Third wave research in gaming studies is still recently new and intersectional lens has not been utilized to explore player experiences across multiple identities. Black Cyberfeminism works to remedy this by merging an intersectional lens from Black feminism into the digital context (Richard & Gray, 2018). The use of an intersectional lens and the expansions to understand the role and impacts of oppression, the forms power takes, and the recognition that interlocking identities provide individuals with aspects of marginalization and privilege providing unique experiences. These concepts become apparent in Black Cyberfeminism in understanding the digital space and privileging voices of marginalized individuals. Three core tenets make up Black Cyberfeminism: a) social structural oppression of technology and virtual spaces; b) intersecting oppressions experienced in virtual spaces; and c) the distinctness of the virtual feminist community.

Social Structural Oppressions

The first theme of Black Cyberfeminism recognizes online spaces as being constructed to center whiteness and continues to function under the assumption that those who participate within the space are assumed to be white, straight, and male (Richard & Gray, 2018). This assumption of white and masculine bodies excludes women and people of color. Marginalized individuals are not a consideration in many aspects of game development through mechanics, gameplay, and software used in games (Brock, 2011; Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007; Mou & Peng, 2009).

Additionally, women and people of color entering and participating in virtual spaces are viewed and treated as deviant (Gray, 2012a), and therefore punished within virtual spaces through exclusionary behaviors. To be clear, deviance in this context is not referring to marginalized bodies as evil or bad. Instead, the concept of deviance is in reference to the gaming space and gaming culture itself. Online gaming spaces have been constructed and maintained to center whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity (Cote, 2017; Gray, 2014; Nakamura, 2012). The introduction to anything beyond these hegemonic aspects in turn disrupt the space. Marginalized folks, once identified, are then subject to experiencing harassment.

Black Cyberfeminism recognizes how marginalized individuals are excluded or their voices ignored in online gaming spaces (Richard & Gray, 2018). Narrative inquiry lends itself to centering and amplifying the voices of historically underrepresented individuals (Amoah, 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, Black Cyberfeminism emphasizes the importance of recognizing the oppressive structures and role of identity in the stories of marginalized individuals and caution scholars from

making color-blind, post-racial, and antifeminist conclusions and potential solutions or ways of knowing (Gray, 2020).

Intersecting Oppressions

The second theme of Black Cyberfeminism refers to the ways which women must confront and work to dismantle the structural domination of intersecting forms of oppressions (Richard & Gray, 2018). Black Cyberfeminism recognizes the diverse ways oppression can manifest and there is no one way to understand oppression and there is no one size fits all way of understanding all forms of oppression. In addition to marginalization, understanding and dismantling privileges that also exist within virtual spaces is important in recognizing the multifaceted ways intersectionality can manifest.

Gray (2020) emphasizes the importance of recognizing where individuals are in relation to the matrix of domination. How do individuals socially relate to and interact with each other? What resources do individuals have access to in order to move towards change and liberation? What is the capacity, both real and perceived, to shape technology? How do individuals resist patriarchy and highlight discrimination? This understanding of the multiple forms of power and how individuals are both marginalized and privileged within these spaces becomes a core component of Black Cyberfeminism (Gray, 2020; Richard & Gray, 2018).

Black Cyberfeminism also recognizes that the lived experiences of marginalized individuals exist in online spaces in addition to offline. Marginalized individuals, specifically Black women, are unable to opt out of aspects of their identities. By privileging these marginalized identities, we can generate progressive and meaningful solutions (Richard & Gray, 2018). By centering the voices of traditionally marginalized

identities, historically underrepresented individuals become the generators of knowledge and challenge the dominant narratives that exist within the digital space. Additionally, Richard & Gray (2018) acknowledge that men and other marginalized communities also experience aspects of toxic masculinity and other forms of oppression just by participating within the digital space. Since individuals cannot simply detach themselves from their own identities when entering the digital space, utilizing this theoretical frame requires me to recognize the way masculinity and other forces of power impact my participants in unique ways.

Distinctness of Virtual Feminist Community

The third theme addresses the unique ways in which Black women utilize virtual technologies. Black women have often used social media for activism and social change. Black Cyberfeminism recognizes that Internet usage and how marginalized individuals, specifically Black women, communicate is a continuation of their offline selves. In addition to their identities, the personal, communal, and political do not become detached (Gray, 2020). Digital media has been utilized by marginalized communities to fulfill needs and amplify voices, which can lead to empowerment (Richard & Gray, 2018).

Black women have a history of repurposing technology to fulfill their own needs (Richard & Gray, 2018). Examples of this include the use of hashtags on *Twitter*, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #CiteHerWork, to increase awareness, connect individuals to resources, and develop community. Other marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQIA+ community, have employed similar methods to meet their needs (e.g. #ProudBoys). These examples emphasize that while aspects of technology may not have been created with a certain focus, marginalized individuals find and create ways to create

their own paths within the digital space. This repurposing can be seen as a form of disruption of the digital space and an act of resistance by carving out space (Gray, 2020).

Black Cyberfeminism and My Research Identity

It is important to recognize the original purpose of the development of Black Cyberfeminism is to understand and privilege the stories and experiences of Black women within virtual spaces. Black Feminism has also been used to explore experiences beyond the intended Black woman experience. I want to be mindful in utilizing this framework not to distract or take away from its intended community (i.e. Black women), while also honoring the complexities of identities and voices in online spaces that Black Cyberfeminism allows. In writing about Black Cyberfeminism, I ask myself, how do I actively maintain awareness of my own privileges and the ways I may be missing key components of a framework that was not meant for me? In thinking about my participants, how can I conduct a study, which requires categories, without limiting my participants? How do I ensure that I honor this theoretical framework's initial purpose while also addressing gaps in this research? These questions are not easily answered and require a critical lens in the development of my own methodological approach. Part of this process will occur by keeping a research journal in order to reflect before and after each interview and through the coding process (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In the recruitment of participants, I am ensuring to not label or assume identities by providing a form beforehand for potential participants to fill out in order to find a diverse participant pool. What I do know is by using Black Cyberfeminism, I approach my participants in a way no other theory can facilitate.

Conclusion

Gaming research has shown that video games, since its inception, have privileged White, male, and heterosexual identities in its development and in online gaming social spaces (Gray, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Paassen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017; Shaw, 2012; Williams, et al., 2009; Kolko, 2000). The critical discourse and content analysis of video games have provided insights on ways gaming also perpetuated forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism (Brock, 2011; Downs & Smith, 2010; Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Research has only recently shifted to focus on the voices of marginalized individuals in these spaces using qualitative methods (Cote, 2011; Gray, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2016; Ortiz, 2018, 2019). Attention is needed to gain deeper understanding of how these experiences impact the identity of historically underrepresented individuals.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As the online gaming community continues to grow, participation from a diverse audience also increases (Pew Research Center, 2015; 2017). Despite this, gaming development, creators, and professional eSports teams do not reflect the diverse demographic of game players (Leonard, 2009; Nakamura 2013; Shaw, 2012). Some social aspects of gaming culture known as “toxic behaviors” can also take the form of racist, homophobic, and sexist actions and behaviors. The addition of online communication and interaction capabilities provides an additional way for individuals to connect with each other, but such features also expand the plethora of ways marginalized individuals can experience discrimination. Interestingly, historically underrepresented individuals continue to participate despite lack of representation and discrimination experienced at the hands of other video game players.

We bring with us the many aspects of our identities when we enter a digital space (Gray, 2017). As in offline spaces, individuals who hold marginalized identities can face discrimination through chats and toxic behaviors in games. This toxicity is not uncommon, but it also creates online spaces that can provide opportunities for individuals to explore and express their identities in new ways, albeit sometimes on the backdrop of negative interactions (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Gray, 2017). Partial anonymity online and in-game mechanics, such as character creation, allow queer individuals the ability to explore or choose whether or not to reveal sexual identity (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Gray, 2017)

Researchers have explored aspects of how historically underrepresented individuals experience online gaming spaces (Gray, 2012a, 2012b, 2015; Ortiz, 2018, 2019), but less is known about how these experiences in online gaming environments impact identity and identity development.

Researcher Lens

Describing my methodological selection requires explaining my theoretical orientation as a researcher and how this influences my decision to use qualitative methods. Who I am is tied into my worldview and my epistemology which informed this study. My theoretical orientation influences how I see the world, shapes my understandings of how things are connected, and guided my methodology and analysis of data (Aliyu, Singhry, Adamu, & Abubakar, 2015). I most align with critical theory which has been a key component in the development of this research.

Critical Theory

The researcher's social position, epistemology, axiology, and ontology are all components which make up the researcher's standpoint (Walter & Anderson, 2013). Critical theory is an important component of my research identity and was influential in my journey coming to learning and understanding the intersections of identity and digital spaces. Critical theory is founded on the tenant that individuals create meaning about reality with attention given to identity, social and historical context, and power dynamics and systems (Creswell, 2003). This lens is also seen in my role as an educator, counselor, and supervisor. While there are various critical theories, Black Feminist theory, specifically, Black Cyberfeminist theory, has been most influential in my development of this dissertation and emphasizes the importance to honor the unique experiences of

marginalized individuals in digital spaces. My interest and understandings of the way digital spaces are constructed and maintained are informed through this critical lens. As such, some aspects of the interviews protocols I created to guide conversations with participants aimed to understand how they understand and “see” the digital spaces in which they participate in (e.g. how do you define game culture?).

Social Position. Social Position relates to who we are within social and cultural contexts and how this impacts our worldview (Walter & Anderson, 2013). I am a 31-year old, Queer-identified, Tejano, cisgender male, doctoral student. My time growing up was predominantly spent with other BIPOC in my neighborhood, schools, and jobs. In my time as a doctoral student, I actively work with various programs that are centered in activism and social justice. My training and experiences within these spaces has influenced the ways I critically think about social and political issues. Furthermore, I actively work to be involved in social justice movements surrounding racial justice, LGBTQIA+ rights, and issues surrounding immigration and border regulations. My online experiences also play a critical role in who I am and how I see myself. I have played games since I was four years old and online games since I was 18. I have experienced feeling ‘othered’ and discriminated against both online and offline, and I have also developed long-lasting friendships with people I have met through gaming. I recognize that my gender and proximity to masculinity provide me with privileges both online and offline.

Epistemology. Epistemology refers to ways of knowing and how knowledge is uncovered (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001). Understanding what is known under a critical theorist perspective is a collaboration between researcher and participant

and the acknowledgement that social power structures are always at play. A semi-structured interview protocol provides an avenue for me to recognize the uniqueness of each participant's lived experience and provides an avenue for participants to share their interpretations of the environments and structures that influence their way of being. Power and how it is wielded is also an important aspect of critical theory. This includes ways in which power presents itself as part of the analysis process. As such, I have invited participants to share their own thoughts and interpretations through member checking of transcripts and the development of themes.

Axiology. Axiology deals with questions and values (Fuziah, 2002). This recognizes that my values, beliefs, and thoughts, come with me as I engage with my research. I see myself as a gamer and actively participate in online gaming spaces daily. My experience with other BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ gamers have shaped my thinking about game spaces and critiques of these spaces. My training as a counselor and educator impacts how I went about interviews, my awareness surrounding mental health, and my viewpoint that social and political powers impact historically underrepresented individuals in various ways.

Ontology. Ontology describes an individual's understanding of what constitutes reality and truth. Aligning with a critical perspective, my belief is that reality is shaped by social, political, and cultural forces. Additionally, the language we use plays an important role in the construction of our realities (Aliyu, et. al, 2015). This concept recognizes that my analysis and findings provided one interpretation of the data and was influenced by my lived experiences and truth. Further, my participants' shared truth is constructed from their own lived experiences.

Research Design

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative research has been utilized in multiple disciplines to deepen understanding of individual experiences. Stories allow us to make sense of experiences and understand the world around us. There is no singularly applicable definition of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Various methodological approaches can be used to analyze participants' stories in narrative research (Riesman, 2007). Structured and semi-structured interviews provide an avenue to understand the lived experiences of individuals through "storytelling" (Creswell, 2013). Narrative inquiry is a collaborative research methodology, in which the researcher and participants are interconnected. Stories emerge from the interview and how they are told (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Storytelling has been utilized in both research and counseling. Narrative techniques in counseling allow opportunities for clients to retell their stories of their lived experiences in order to understand, make meaning, and reframe maladaptive thinking (White, 2007). Through research, narrative inquiry allows us to gain insight of the lived experiences of individuals (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Clandinin (2013) identifies three commonplaces of narrative inquiry to engage in the narrative process: temporality, sociality, and place. The first commonplace of temporality asserts, "events under study are in temporal transition" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). Understanding people and events as in transition with past, present, and future is important within narrative inquiry. This commonplace includes the researcher, participant, how stories are told, and the story itself. Sociality ensures that the researcher gives attention to the emotions, reactions, and cultural components. Finally,

the place aspect of commonplace is situating events in space and time. Clandinin (2013) asserts that attending to these three commonplaces is critical in the collection of data.

Why Narrative

Narratives are situated within social, historical, and cultural contexts (Riessman, 2003) and allow for a platform to unify shared meanings and values within experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988). Through studying social, cultural, and historical structures in stories I worked to understand in this study how participants perceive and experience various cultural spheres (Riessman, 2003).

A benefit of narrative inquiry is how narratives can deepen understanding about identity (Riessman, 2003). This goes beyond what is only said but also how a story is performed for others and the ways a person chooses to ‘display’ their self and identity (Riessman, 2003). How a person chooses to introduce, describe, and tell the story of themselves, other characters, the world around them can all give insight to the dynamics that exist between the various social, cultural, and historical structures that may exist without necessarily being said. By being able to recognize narratives as performances, I was able to gain deeper understandings of identity.

Narrative inquiry provides participants freedom in how they share their stories and experiences. Participants have autonomy in how they engage with their stories and make sense of their identities (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Participants can choose how to tell their stories, what to reveal, and use body language in the telling of their stories. This content, style, and structure of story-telling provide unique insight in how individuals understand their lived experiences.

Narrative allows historically underrepresented individuals to reclaim their voices (Amoah, 1997). Narratives also facilitate a research process that works to empower participants and challenge dominant ideologies (Rodriguez, 2006). Stories contain the truth of human experience (Amoah, 1997). Narratives allow for individuals to understand their own experiences and make their lives understandable to others (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, Zaman, 2011). This truth is important in understanding the lived experiences of historically underrepresented individuals whose stories are often silenced or disregarded. A tenet of Black feminist theory is to privilege and uplift stories about discrimination from the perspective of people of color and those who are often left on the margins. These stories challenge the majority master narratives and work to disrupt discourses that serve to suppress historically underrepresented people (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). As this research focused on the voices of historically underrepresented individuals, narrative provides an opportunity for stories and truths to be told in the least altered way.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do experiences within online gaming environments impact the identity of Queer Black and Latinx masculine identifying individuals, and how are identities impacted by online gaming experiences in those environments?

Research Question 2: How do identity and lived experience influence actions within online gaming environments?

Participants

Researcher

It is important for qualitative research scholars to “position” themselves within their writing (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) identifies the researcher’s experiences

with the phenomenon and how these experiences shape the researcher's position as important components of reflexivity. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) emphasize narrative inquirers cannot remove themselves from the storytelling process.

I am a Queer Mexican American male clinical mental health counselor and supervisor. I have been playing video games since the age of four and playing in online gaming environments for eight years. My identities and experience with gaming provide me with both perspective and bias that will need to be explored and noted throughout the course of this study. On one hand, I have made great connections with people and have enjoyed my time in online gaming spaces. On the other hand, I have endured racist and homophobic language and actions from other players. This has been a challenge for me to navigate, since people who do and do not play video games dismiss this as just part of the game, not being a "big deal," or not "real" discrimination. While video games have been a source of wellness and enjoyment for me, the behavior of other players has been a source of distress at times.

It is both important and necessary that a qualitative researcher be aware of their own biases (Creswell, 2013). The following biases may be most influential to this study. First, I recognize my belief that video game players with marginalized identities experience online gaming environments differently than those who hold more privilege. This belief is tied to my own experiences facing discrimination within online gaming environments. Second, I actively do work surrounding equity and social justice. This work has shaped my perceptions of the world and increased my awareness of power structures and instances of oppression and discrimination. I was actively aware how this shaped the way I uncovered and heard details of participant stories. I needed to be wary

of filling in gaps of people's stories with my own assumptions without exploring or hearing from the voice of participants.

The experiences of some my gaming friends have also been a driving force to understand how historically underrepresented video game players navigate these online environments. I have met other people of color and individuals who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community who have stated they avoid or take certain precautions before engaging in these environments since other people can openly discriminate against them. Additionally, many conversations I have been part of within online gaming spaces focus on current social and political events. These experiences made me curious about how others with marginalized identities navigate these online spaces.

Participant Demographics

Collection of stories in narrative inquiry can range from single to multiple cases (Creswell, 2013). The goal of this study was to provide multiple personal experiences of individuals within online gaming environments in order to illustrate a variety of rich perspectives. Purposeful sampling was used to select individuals as participants in this study in order to provide multiple diverse perspectives. Criteria for individuals to participate in this study included: (a) self-identify as Black and/or Latinx, sexual minority, and have a connection to masculine aligning identity, (b) currently engage with online gaming environments where audio communication and/or text chat is used as a component of gameplay, and (c) over the age of 18. Racial diversity between Black and Latinx identifying individuals recruited for this study was balanced between participants. Gender and sexual identity varied for participants due to the fluidity and complexity that exists with sexuality and gender.

Sampling

Study participants consisted of nine individuals. Purposeful sampling, followed by snowball sampling, were used to identify potential study participants. My prior knowledge of individuals who actively engage within online gaming environments allowed entry to another potential participant pool. Because I actively participate in online gaming spaces including *Twitch* and *Discord*, I often hear or are in spaces with primarily Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC). Snowball sampling allowed for the recruitment of additional participants. Snowball sampling involved asking participants to refer other individuals who fit within my criteria (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Previous qualitative research exploring the experiences of historically underrepresented individuals in online gaming spaces have participant pools ranging from four to fifteen individuals (Gray, 2012a, 2012b, 2018; Ortiz, 2018, 2019). Narrative inquiry research seeks depth rather than breadth (Patton, 2002). Smaller sample sizes allow researchers to explore participants' experiences in depth which creates rich and descriptive data (Patton, 2002). Twelve individuals reached out with interest to participate in the study. After reviewing preliminary survey results and participants learning about the interview procedure, nine participants were selected to participate in this study.

Chapter One identified race, sexual orientation, and gender as the main identities that are often discriminated against within online gaming environments. Participants defined their own held identity in regards to race, gender, and sexual orientation in order to respect participants' self-constructions and avoid oppression through categorization in order to align with an intersectionality framework (van Mens-Verhulst and Radtke,

2008). Although participants were not required to utilize mics or in-game chat, participants needed to play online video games that offer communication features as part of gameplay.

An aspect of the research criteria that shifted over time were the original constraints placed for gender identity. Original criteria for participant recruitment required individuals to identify as male. Several individuals reached out sharing they believed they fit criteria for the study but did not “necessarily” identify as male. As I learned from these individuals and consulted with one of my committee members, I realized the identity component I was interested in understanding was not “male-ness” but rather the relationships to masculinity within the spectrum of gender identity.

A questionnaire (see Appendix B) was used to collect data about participants that included: (a) race/ethnicity, (b) sexual orientation, (c) gender identity, (d) pronouns, (e) online video games recently played. Table # provides a succinct overview of participants. Participants who took part in the study self-identified as follows:

- 1) Four participants identified as Black, one participant identified as Mixed English/African, and four participants identified as Latino/Latinx (One as Puerto Rican, two as Mexican, one as South American)
- 2) Four participants identified as Gay, three identified as bisexual, and two as Queer
- 3) Six participants identified as Male, one as a Trans Man, one as non-binary, and one as genderqueer
- 4) Seven participants use he/him pronouns, one uses he/him/they/them, and one uses they/them

- 5) Participants discussed and identified several online video games that they played actively both previously and at the time of the interview. Chapter 4 provides a brief overview of the various games.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Race/Ethnicity	Sexuality	Gender
Alejandro	Puerto Rican	Queer (Bi/Pan)	Male
Jackson	Black	Gay	Male
Robbie	Latino (South American)	Gay	Male
Virgil	Black	Queer	Non-binary
Lucas	Mixed English/African	Bisexual	Male
Jaime	Mexican	Bisexual	Male
Miles	Black	Bisexual	Trans Man
Victor	Black	Gay	Male
Roberto	Mexican	Gay	Genderqueer

Data Collection

Once participants were identified, I contacted potential participants by email or, if they preferred, *Discord* to explain the study and request their participation (see Appendix A). Interview times were scheduled once an individual agreed to participate. Due to COVID-19 restrictions at the time of this study, all interviews were held via video communication software. All participants were provided information that outlined the purpose of the study, instructions on how to contact the researcher if they had any questions, and informed consent documents (see Appendix C). These were reviewed by the participant at the interview. Participants gave verbal consent on their willingness to participate in the study.

Storing Data

Due to COVID restrictions, interactions and forms were digital. Participants were provided a digital copy of the informed consent before the first interview. At the interview, researcher gave an opportunity for participants to ask questions and clarify any information from the informed consent. After reviewing and having their questions answered, participants provided verbal consent. Recordings from interview were immediately downloaded and stored within Box, a two-factor authenticated password protected folder as suggested by the University Institutional Review Board. Recordings and transcriptions were stored in individual folders created to represent each participant in the study. Only the researcher had access to these folders. Once recordings were stored, they were deleted from their original location.

Interview Methods

Narratives were collected through individual in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each participant (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Creswell, 2007). Interviews were conducted via video/audio software. Interviews were audio-recorded. Back-ups were created immediately following each interview. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in order to ensure trustworthiness (Seidman, 2013). Member checking was utilized to comment on the accuracy and provide adjustments and additions where needed (Cho & Trent, 2006; Koelsch, 2013). Transcripts were sent to participants to look over and adjust language or add information they believed was

needed in order for better understanding of their stories. Pseudonyms were created for confidentiality.

Narrative inquiry views participants as individuals with stories to tell and not as having the answers to my research question (Chase, 2010). Insight into the phenomena I am studying will be provided through the telling and listening of each persons' stories. Due to the fluid nature of this process, the interview protocol (see Appendix D) acted as a guide and evolved depending on the interview and the story that emerges.

One interview was conducted using a semi-structured format (Seidman, 2006). Semi-structured interviews are open-ended and begin with a generative narrative question, which begins as a broad open-ended question to encourage participants to tell their stories in detail (Flick, 2010). Interviews began with getting to know participant's involvement in online gaming spaces and general experiences in online gaming environments. Prompts then had participants tell stories of experiences surrounding aspects of their identities (e.g. How do your experiences in these online gaming spaces influence your identity?). An interview guide provided questions, probes, and prompts for me to obtain additional details from participants. There was a focus on their history in online gaming spaces, how they understood their own identities, emotions and impacts of their online gaming experiences, and communities of which they were actively a part.

Memo Writing

A journal to note my thoughts and feelings surrounding interviews and the research process overall was kept and written in after each interview. Memo writing provides researchers an opportunity to process biases, assumptions, and beliefs (Creswell

& Miller, 2000). Additional notes can be taken about the environment, body language of participants and interviewer, and emotions throughout the process. The following are questions I reflected on after each interview:

1. What thoughts and emotions came up for me before/during/after the interview?
2. What emotions seemed to come up for the participant?
3. How does what I learned from hearing the participant's story fit with my own experiences?
4. What changes or enhancements would be helpful for future interviews?

This memo writing provided me an avenue to process my assumptions, beliefs, and reactions. The reflective process allowed me to adjust how I was asking questions and prompts during the interview process. Keeping a journal for additional notes on my own perspectives provided additional insight as I went back and read participant transcripts. For example, this reflective process allowed me to interpret participant stories accurately and from the perspective of the participants rather than from my own interpretations. My responses to the previous questions were used to provide further insight during the data analysis phase of the study (Glense, 2011). The goal in using memo writing was not to eliminate my bias. The memo writing also allowed me to be transparent about how I understood the data and ensured participants were centered throughout the process.

Data Analysis

This study utilized thematic analysis to unpack and make sense of participants' stories and experiences. Thematic analysis is described as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p. 79). Since the purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Queer Black and Latinx individuals with a connection to masculine identity, this method provides thick descriptions and in-depth analysis of experience to produce thematic patterns across all shared stories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following will provide an outline of the coding and analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Phase One: Becoming One with the Data

Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize the importance of becoming immersed with data. This process is done through first transcribing interviews, verbatim shortly after they are completed. Transcriptions included all verbal and non-verbal data. Transcriptions were then reviewed for accuracy by reading while listening to interviews and sent to participants for member checking. Then were read and re-read on multiple occasions for the researcher to become familiar with the data. Thoughts, comments, reactions, and things I wondered were noted throughout transcripts. Additional notes on how tone of voices changed, emotions of participants, and other expressions were noted as well. Transcripts were then uploaded to a qualitative data analysis software program, nVivo, once they were reviewed and checked for accuracy. The program was used for data storage and to log, track, and organize codes manually applied to transcripts.

Although nVivo has the capability to filter general themes based on information, I chose to manually group themes and used nVivo only as a digital tool to organize themes, sub-themes, and codes.

Phase Two: Initial Coding

My manual coding process will begin when each transcript is uploaded to nVivo. Transcripts were examined by the researcher and raw data was examined to note significant quotes (i.e. horizontalization). Codes were developed from powerful statements in participants' stories, expressional cues such as tone of voice, or moments participants share that were important. These codes were highlighted and manually assigned a code I generated. Identified quotes were sometimes coded with multiple codes. For example, when one participant discussed a feeling affirmed by their online gaming community, I coded this with "affirmation," "community building," and "connection." When other quotes described aspects of connecting with others came up in other transcripts, I duplicated this coding structure. After coding an interview, I then identified new codes that were created, re-read other participants' transcripts, and continued this process for each interview. All interview transcripts were read, coded, reviewed, re-read, and additional codes were added numerous times throughout the process. I followed Braun and Clarke (2003) suggestions to not overthink codes during this phase of analysis. Rather, I identified what seemed to stand out through my continuous readings of the data. This process resulted in originally 68 codes that were eventually condensed, eliminated, or kept. Many codes were condensed due to the phrasing initially used for codes. For

example, I used the codes “blending in”, “anonymity”, and “anonymous” in different transcripts during the first review of transcripts.

Phase Three: Finding the Themes

Phase three began with analyzing codes that were generated during phase two. My process for identifying themes (clusters of related codes) began with writing down a description of each code, writing codes down on a note card, and then grouping up codes that were thematically similar. Codes were actively reorganized many times. I often touched base with an individual familiar with the study in order to talk through rationale and reasonings behind developing themes. The figure below provides a visual depiction of the final themes generated and the sub-themes that make them up.

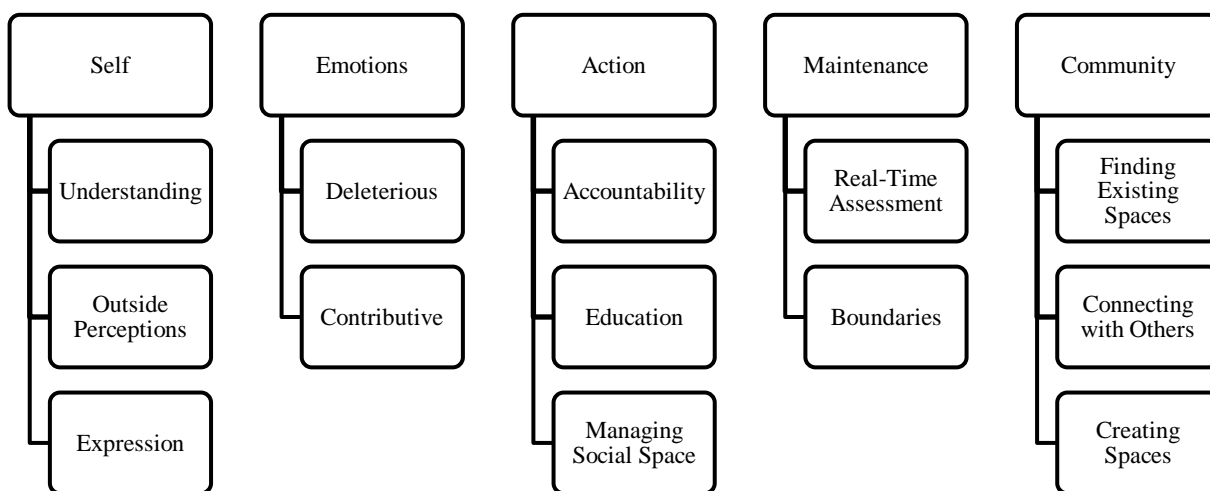


Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes.
A visual representation of themes and their associated sub-themes.

The above themes and sub-themes will be more fully explored in Chapter Four with connections to participant narratives. Chapter Five will expand further to tie into the research questions and the literature review.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Multiple procedures should be utilized by researchers in order to account for quality, trustworthiness, and rigor in narrative studies (Creswell, 2013). In order to follow these recommendations, I: a) have a written statement of researcher bias and kept a journal for memo writing to monitor and be aware of any biases that arose, b) engaged in persistent and thoughtful observation of the data through multiple reviews of interviews and keeping various notes on my thoughts and reactions in transcripts; c) provided participants with transcripts, interpretations, and analyses in order to obtain their thoughts and adjustments if needed. One participant provided additions to add context as themes and components of their narratives were put together. All other participants had no adjustments to their texts, d) included rich, thick descriptions and narratives, and e) my committee chair and another committee member served as external reviewers of my process and final product.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Narrative research design allows researchers to focus on lived experiences and stories of participants. The goal of the research is to listen and explore the experiences and stories of participants and learn how their experiences relate to the research questions. These narrators are not just providing data, they are people with rich histories, complex stories, and unique experiences. It is critical to remember their humanness prior to understanding how their stories inform this research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013). This chapter will begin with a brief introduction to participants in order for the reader to understand who each participant is and the online gaming spaces they participate in. The second part of the chapter will provide an in-depth discussion of findings. Information surrounding participants' gaming history and their understanding of gaming culture were outside the scope of this study. These pieces of participant narratives will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Participant Overview

Nine individuals participated in this research and shared their stories of their experiences in online gaming spaces. The names of participants have been changed and names of locations have been left intentionally vague in order to protect the identities to the best of my ability. The purpose of this section is to provide the reader an idea of who the people are behind the data. The following provides a brief description of each participant and the online gaming spaces they actively participated in at the time of their interview.

Alejandro

Alejandro describes himself as a 30-year-old, Queer Puerto Rican man. He was born and raised in [an international country] but moved around often due to his father being in the military. Talking with Alejandro felt like talking with an old friend. He entered our conversation with a cold beer and enthusiasm to share his thoughts and feelings with gaming. He had a warm energy which made me feel comfortable and relaxed for my first “real” interview. Alejandro would often bring in pop-culture references to describe his experiences and understandings.

Before entering PC gaming, Alejandro shares owning various handheld gaming devices and gaming consoles. Alejandro received encouragement to participate in gaming from various sources. Family members became his introduction to some games as well as being able to play with siblings:

“My dad’s thing back in the 90s was Descent [...] That was his jam. I was probably like somewhere between, like, five and eight, he would just be on a joystick flying around and have one of [my siblings or me] pulling up the different weapons for him to utilize [...] My sister hilariously got into WoW mostly because of her boyfriend who also was like [playing] with my main friend group. And I could always play Mario Kart or Smash alongside my brother.”

Alejandro participates in various gaming spaces with most of his time being spent in game and in *Discord*. Alejandro shows appreciation for what online gaming can provide for people:

[Online gaming] provides so many opportunities for just like natural interaction and commentary that allow you to demonstrate character and insight and that is something that you don't get from like standing around and drinking beers.

Roberto

Roberto identifies himself as a “Mexican identifying queer boy.” He was born and raised in Mexico and has lived in a border town for most of his life. He shares much of his time growing crossing back and forth between Mexico and the United States since his family lived on both sides. Roberto is bilingual, speaking both English and Spanish. He has his hair dyed a bright color, which he attributes to having control and challenging ideas of machismo. My conversation with Roberto was filled with laughter. He was very light hearted and his body language helped tell his stories and experiences.

Roberto's interest in online gaming grew as he spent time with one of his cousins growing up. His interest in fighting games led him to try out the online component of the games he was already playing:

“I got exposed to [online games] a little bit by watching [my cousin] play games at night while I was asleep at the top bunk. I would hear him play all these games until 2 AM or just hear him talk [to friends online]. One day I decided to pick up the controller I booted up [the Xbox] [...] the first online multiplayer or online player interaction I had was with Street Fighter. Fighting games have always been one of my favorite things and knowing now that I can fight somebody somewhere across the world and kick their ass, to me, is something very nice.”

Roberto spends most of his online gaming time playing fighting games such as *Street Fighter* and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*. He will sometimes also play *Overwatch*

with friends. Beyond in-game interactions, Roberto uses *Discord* and gaming communities through Twitter to connect and play with other individuals.

Miles

Miles is a bisexual, Trans Man. At the time of the interview, Miles was starting graduate school for a sociology program with an interest in policing, digital media, race, and the intersections of the three. Miles was soft spoken and somewhat reserved at the beginning of our conversation. As time went on, he became more open and comfortable. Miles would spend a few seconds deep in thought before answering or responding to prompts.

Miles was introduced to gaming at a young age by his uncle. His siblings would also play games so there was always someone around who he could engage in games with. Miles began playing online games as he grew older and had his own income:

“I think [I got into online gaming] mostly wanting to play with friends. I remember back in middle school when I would Skype my friends and stuff. We would play, like, Tetris Online together and Club Penguin. Once I got my first job and [my own] income, I was like “Oh, cool! I can hop online [and] play Overwatch or League [of Legends], more regularly. [...] Once I started getting into consoles and stuff it was a whole new world of gaming that I was exposed to.”

Miles participated in various online game spaces. Many of Miles’ experiences in-game were in *Overwatch*, *Monster Hunter*, and *League of Legends*. He also spent much of his online gaming time in *Discord* and on *Twitch* as a viewer.

Virgil

Virgil identifies as a Black, Queer, non-binary person and use they/them pronouns. I was immediately in awe when Virgil turned on their camera. Their room was filled with various gaming memorabilia and they wore a jersey for an Overwatch eSports team. They describe themselves as a lifelong gamer and have participated in various tournaments. At the time of our conversation, *Overwatch* was the primary online gaming space Virgil participated in. In recent years, Virgil has gotten more into *Overwatch* and engaging with the eSports side of gaming:

“Overwatch led me to the Overwatch League and eSports. That’s where I’ve been game wise, for the last three seasons. So three years. It’s just been so much fun and such a good hobby. I mean I’ve got all these posters. I’m actually wearing a jersey today.”

There was an energy of excitement that came from Virgil as they talked about games. We often went off topic often in the beginning of our conversations and connected over talking about *Overwatch* and playing ranked mode as a non-professional player. Conversations surrounding oppression and the experiences surrounding marginalized folks was something Virgil had an interest in discussing. Our conversation had me re-thinking how I understand gender and masculinity.

Jackson

Jackson describes himself as a “gay Black man whose passion is gaming.” He works in the court system primarily with kids and describes his real life as “super boring.” His job can be stressful and gaming provides him a way to relax after long days. He shared how video games have been part of his life since he was two or three years old:

“I started [gaming] really young. My older brother was big into gaming. My parents were too back then. It started from the SNES, I had every system since then, and then got into PC gaming in like 2004. [World of Warcraft] really set off my online gaming experience.”

Jackson would share multiple epiphanies he had by sharing and processing out loud. It was really interesting to see how he would unpack his understandings and connect his experiences together. We would go off topic when he brought up a new game to talk about how “wild” some communities can be. Our conversation was a fun balance between thoughtful, seriousness and playful banter. Most of his online experiences in games were from playing *World of Warcraft*. He also shares some moments in playing *Valorant* and sometimes *Apex*. In addition to games, Jackson spends time on *Twitch* and in various *Discords*.

Lucas

Lucas identifies as a Bisexual, Mixed-race, man. He works in social media marketing and spends much of his time surrounded by the competitive gaming scene. He lives in the UK and plays with people both in the UK and the United States. Most of his time is spent playing *Overwatch* or *League of Legends* with friends. Lucas has participated in games for most of his life:

“[I’ve been] gaming too long. I was quite young. My first game was either FIFA 2000 or Tarzan the demo that came for free with the newspaper [...] I spent a fair amount of time playing games. Not massively competitively but just mostly to vibe.”

When I think of the term “vibin” I think of Lucas. He was very relaxed during our interview. He was my second interview and I had nerves going into our conversation. His relaxing energy was extremely helpful for me at the time.

Jaime

Jaime is a bisexual, Latinx, man. His family is from Mexico and he was born on the east coast of the United States. Jaime spends his time creating content for his *Twitch* channel and podcasts. He shares always having a love for video games and being a huge *Nintendo* fan:

“I grew up with video games and for a while we didn’t have internet, so I was late to the internet game I guess. I love video games though. [There was] a point where I think it was World of Warcraft was my first thing and my brother was more into it than I was. He started to get me into [online gaming]. And then there’s the multiplayer features from Nintendo and I am a huge Nintendo fan. Smash Bros. [was] my first online gaming [experience].”

People and connections seemed to be important for Jaime in our conversation. He shares how he appreciated being able to “hang out with someone” in games. Jaime was charismatic and energetic throughout our conversation. He streams on Twitch and his entertaining personality really stood out during the interview.

At the time of our conversation, Jaime mostly played *Among Us*, *Dead by Daylight*, and *World of Warcraft*. He would spend time on Twitch as both a viewer and a streamer and engage in multiple *Discords*.

Victor

Victor is a Black, bisexual, man. Before the interview, I had been in similar online gaming spaces, such as *Twitch*, with Victor, but never had we spent time playing games together. Victor enjoys tabletop and story driven games the most.

“I also spend probably too much time playing video games. Specifically, games that are story-driven. [Many of my] experiences are with tabletop games, but also visual novels where you have a set of choices that you can make.”

His gaming experience was the most unique compared to other participants. I had not considered before talking with him how many tabletop games (i.e. role playing games and board games) have moved to being played online through *Twitch* and *Discord*. His involvement in online games was gradual and was a way for him to play with other people in different places.

Victor had a way of sharing his experiences and telling a story. It was clear he had much experience in story-driven games by the way he engaged and shared his experiences. His body language and expressions helped bring his stories to life. At the time of our conversation, online spaces Victor spent time with included *League of Legends*, various *Discord* servers, and *Twitch* as both a streamer and a viewer.

Robbie

Robbie identifies as a gay man. He was born and lives in South America. Robbie shared how his relationship with ethnicity is different since he does not live in the United States. Gaming has always been part of Robbie’s life. He started by watching his family play and eventually it became something he would do with his friends:

“I’ve been playing games since I was very, very young. Like, even before I was physically able to play games. I just watched my sister or cousins playing games [...] One of the first [online games] that I played was RuneScape. Someone found it and they just told everyone in the [friend] group to play.”

Although he lives in South America, Robbie mostly plays online games with people in the United States. Robbie enjoys the competitive aspects of games and spends his time playing competitive or ranked modes in games. Robbie played multiple online games including *League of Legends*, *Fortnite*, and, previously, *Assassin's Creed*. He engages mostly on *Twitch* as a viewer and in *Discord* more recently.

Brief Overview of Games

Participants share engaging in various games. The following section will provide brief descriptions of some games mentioned to provide the reader with background on games mentioned in this chapter. I will provide the genre, a brief summary of the goal of the game, and how online mechanics work in the game.

League of Legends

League of Legends (LoL) is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game. There are multiple game modes for players to choose from. One of the main modes has two teams of five players competing against each other through combat. Players choose from various “champions” with unique abilities, playstyles, and roles. Each team occupies half of the map and must work to attack their opponents’ side while also defending their team's side. Text-chat is one of the main ways of communicating with both your team and all players in the game. This feature can be turned off, however, communication is key to winning if playing competitively.

World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). Players can create their own character and explore an open world, fight monsters, interact with other players, and complete quests. Game mechanics, such as dungeons, encourage players to work together with other players, however, people can play solo as well. Text chat is primarily used in game to communicate with other players. Additionally, players can create “guilds” which are in-game communities. Guilds make raiding or grouping up with players easier and is a social component of the game.

Overwatch

Overwatch is an online team-based first-person shooter (FPS). There are various game modes for players to choose from. The primary modes consist of two teams of six players each competing against each other while working towards certain objectives. Players can choose to play from a large roster of “heroes” with unique abilities. Players can choose to group up with friends in a “party” or play with random players. Text-chat can be used to communicate with teammates and the enemy team. Voice chat is also available to communicate with your own private party or with your team. As with other FPS games, communication becomes more important when playing more competitive modes.

Valorant

Valorant is a tactical FPS game. Two teams of five players assigned to either “attack” or “defend.” The attacking team must coordinate and work together to plant a bomb and ensure it detonates. Defending team works to either stop players from planting the bomb or defuse the bomb after it is planted. Players can choose from various “agents”

with unique powers, playstyles, and roles. Text-chat and voice chat can be utilized in game. Since communication is highly important for winning in higher levels of gameplay, using a mic becomes almost a requirement for players wanting to play competitively.

Among Us

Among Us is an online multiplayer social deduction game. Between four and ten people can play in a game lobby at once. Players take on one of two roles: Crewmate or Imposter. Crewmates work together completing goals on a ship while the Imposter(s) work to sabotage and kill the Crew before they can complete all their tasks. Crewmates win if they complete all tasks or identify who all the Imposters are and vote them off the ship. Imposters win if they can kill all Crewmates before they complete their tasks. Although there is no talking while completing tasks, players can initiate “meetings” to discuss and vote out a member they believe is the Imposter. Voting results in ejecting someone off the ship. Once you are killed or ejected you cannot speak until a new game starts. Players typically utilize *Discord’s* voice chatting feature when playing this game.

Theme Development

The chapter is an opportunity to learn about the unique experience and the ways in which their identities shape their experiences within online gaming spaces. Two research questions guided the learning and understanding of participant stories

Research Question 1: How do experiences had within online gaming environments impact the identity of marginalized individuals?

Research Question 2: How do identity and lived experiences influence actions within online gaming environments?

Five themes emerged from the data: 1) Self, 2) Emotions, 3) Action, 4) Maintenance, and 5) Community. This chapter is divided into themes to develop a rich picture of these data. All participant names are changed, and any identifiable affiliations were left intentionally vague in order to protect participant identities as best as possible. The analyzed interview transcripts were used for the quotes included in this chapter.

Self

The theme of Self emerged from learning about the unique, lived experience of participants. Exploring their experiences and how their values, beliefs, and identities influence how they see and experience the world in both offline and online capacities. Sub-themes that emerge within Self included Understanding, Outside Perceptions, and Expression. One of the pieces that stands out the most to me in this section is the way in which many of the narratives shared under each sub-theme have examples that connect to other sub-themes. The overlap and connection of these sub-themes show the interconnectedness of these aspects of identity.

Understanding

"I have to be all of those things at the same time, just by default. All of them at the same time. I don't get to turn them off."-Victor

The first subtheme of Understanding focuses on the ways in which participants understand and continue to learn about their identities and how these identities influence how they see the world and their experiences. Additionally, values of participants show up as part of this sub-theme. The insights surrounding how participants understood their identities and values became the foundation in understanding their experiences and helped contextualize the worldview of the participants. In this section, participants

discuss the intersections of multiple identities, discovering and evolving identities, conflicting cultures, uncertainty, privilege, and personal values. Victor's description of his identities is a reminder of how intersecting identities are not multiple identities living independent from each other and the frustration he feels when other people try and isolate parts of himself:

"I'm just your garden variety Black American male. As far as sexuality goes I am like the entire B in LGBTQIA+ [...] and while we're here because people like to ask me this question for no good reason, "Hey, which of those things do you look for more in terms of your identity? Is it more of a Black thing or is it more of an LGBT thing for you?" And I'm just like, "You know, I don't know if you know this or not, but I have to be all of those things at the same time, just by default. All of them at the same time. I don't get to turn them off." Like I don't get to be like, you know what? I'm just kind of, we're just gonna not be Black today. Like, that's not how that works. I'm just gonna put that in the box. We're gonna put that in the box until I get this Amazon order out of the way. You know, like, I just don't get to do that."

I found this statement by Victor powerful and I believe it was an important quote to start off our journey in understanding the identities of participants. It resonated with me and stayed with me even after our conversation. It reminds us that the multiple identities of participants are not existing separately from each other, but rather are actively interacting and co-existing at the same time.

Identity can be actively evolving and is often referred to as a fluid process. Some participants were continuing to learn about different aspects of their identities and the

social pressures that influenced their process. In some ways, the fluid process can lead to rediscovered identities and reconnecting with cultures. For Jaime, growing up in the United States and in social spaces where others did not share his Mexican culture led to feeling disconnected from his Mexican culture. Specifically, language for him was an important aspect of his cultural identity he became more distant from. Jaime shared how he had more recently has been more intentional in refamiliarizing himself with his Mexican culture:

“[I am] Mexican. It's my culture. It's what I grew up with. Interestingly though, there was a period in time where I was kind of missing because I felt very whitewashed for a while. In the past 10 years really, I've been reclaiming that sense of, like, music, food, and other things that are like in Spanish too 'cause I started to lose my Spanish and I couldn't speak it very well. I still can't. Sort of like a cultural identity that it kind of connects me with people that are similar or, you know, if they're not Latinx and or Mexican even. But any of those, it connects me with them but also sort of differentiates me from others.”

Labels and identities do not always fit so neatly in a box. Gender and sexuality for many participants were some of the more fluid and newly understood identities. While Jaime's ethnic identity was being rediscovered but more solidified, his sexuality and gender was less constrained to one identity marker. He shares how he is actively learning more about his sexual and gender identities:

“Understanding that I like who I like and there isn't necessarily an emphasis on gender, you know? Bisexual. Pansexual. Why I choose bisexual I'm not actually 100% sure, [laughs] but I would never be like, "Oh, I don't like so and so because

they they're not X, Y, and Z." It's just understanding that I care about people and sexually attracted to people that are the same gender as me and then also other genders that aren't the same as mine. [My sexual identity] is a big one for me because-- In today's world, I feel like we're like polarized a lot. You have to be like one or another and so it's like, "Well, I'm somewhere in the middle" in a sense or like on a different plane. Like when your friends are saying, "Oh, you're gay," and then you're having to make that comment of like depending on the context, "Oh well, I'm not gay."

So [my gender identity] I'm still trying to understand because we're realizing there's more to it than we just assume. Although there is also the discovery in a sense in myself of like feeling at times a sort of move to non-binary. You know, not feeling controlled in the sense of I need to do this or that way to present myself. But still identifying as cis-gender"

As Jaime discussed his learning process of his own identities there was a sense of excitement and pride. The discovery process for Jaime seemed to bring him genuine joy despite some challenges for him to explain or correct others who misinterpret his identities. For another participant, the self-discovery process was a more distressing and isolating experience.

Miles' gender identity as a Trans Man was a newer identity he was coming to understand at the time of our interview. Being surrounded by a predominately white and non-Queer community contributed to Miles feeling more isolated in his own discovery process. He shared the influence of his offline experiences:

“Well, it's crazy because like I kind of, it's been pretty recently that I've like come out as a trans man and like have started to like live publicly as a trans man [...] and the town I grew up in was like pretty white, like, very hetero normative. [Since before college] I could tell that I wasn't straight. That I wasn't, you know, a woman or whatever, but it was like to further ostracize myself along those dimensions. [...] Being Black in the space and trying to navigate the micro-aggressions that I experienced. Once I got to college and stuff that was [when] the trans identity and the bisexuality came out much more strongly. Now when I'm walking around I always think about how are people perceiving my gender, more so than anything [...] the priority between all those identities kind of shifts a lot. But I always felt one more strongly than the other.”

This excerpt from Miles' story highlights the social influence on the discovery and understanding process for some individuals. There was a sense of sadness in his voice as he brought up his experience from his younger days. This was a shift of tone for Miles compared to his upbeat personality from when we started the interview and he discussed his current independence, freedom, and current friends. The interacting of several identities was also shared for Jackson:

“I still struggle with my identity. I feel like less so than I did in the past, but I had accepted both of those facts that I am gay and I am Black and I will have a very nuanced experience in my life that a lot of people won't understand. So, I feel like I see- I see things and I experienced things that, you know, even like a White gay man wouldn't necessarily understand.”

The next story provides insight on the ways in which some participants' identities conflict at times. For Roberto, there is a sense of pride in his Mexican culture:

"I am a Mexican identifying queer boy [...] I think the first one that I always take into consideration is my Mexican heritage. I've always been very proud of being Mexican. I've always been proud of being a first-generation Mexican student. I'm very proud of my culture. [...] I think it's important to be proud of being a person of color."

Similar to Jaime, Roberto's sexuality and gender identity did not easily fit into the constraints of a label. Additionally, although he has pride in his Mexican culture, his gender identity and Mexican culture seemed to be in conflict while he lived at home:

"I actually use the word queer just because I do identify as gay. I am more attracted to male partners, but as far as, like, gender and sexuality I believe that I live in the spectrum of female and male. So, to me that's very genderqueer. [...] I've always struggled with [my gender] identity clashing [with my Mexican culture] because my dad used to be very male-centered and the male is the King of the household. And the household needs to be ran by the man and the man needs to be able to do this and do that and look a certain way."

Being Mexican myself, I was familiar with Roberto's description of machismo culture within Latinx communities. Machismo refers to the emphasis on masculinity and traditional gender roles. Roberto bringing up the concept of men being the "King" of the household resonated with me and I made a facial reaction. We went on a quick tangent where I shared that my father had the nickname of being 'El Rey' since he was the oldest sibling and many of the concepts Roberto described were a component of my own

childhood. Our quick side conversations created a form of solidarity and comfort.

Roberto continued to share how growing up within this cultural sphere impacted his sexuality and gender:

“Even since I was little, I've never really identified with those things and that made that internal struggle of those two things fighting because it's like, I don't like watching sports or I don't like fixing stuff's on the weekends or I don't like talking about women. I don't find enjoyment in that. I do like talking about fashion. I do like talking about men. I do like men. Plain and simple. Those things clash because I've always lived with my dad being oppressive over those things. And that kind of leads into the genderqueer part because I've been taught to present more male since I was little like I've always had to have short hair. I've always had literally my hair used to be this short, like all around, like buzz cut. And that was like my way of presenting male [...] when you're little, you have these identities inside you and they're fighting and struggling.”

Roberto's ability to leave his household and gain autonomy in his choices and decisions seemed to allow for his identities to be less in conflict:

“I still have Mexican pride. I am very happy to be a person of color and now fully coming to the acceptance of being a genderqueer gay man. I don't have any issues with those two things clashing because I'm very supported by my mom now. I don't really care what my dad says anymore. And I've had more connections to people that identify as Mexican that are like, “Well, you can do whatever you want.” Like it's not, this isn't the 19th century where you have to live in machismo anymore.”

For one participant, geographical location was a factor contributing to the lack of gay representation he had access to which impacted how he viewed his own sexual orientation. Robbie shares how this lack of representation lead to feelings of uncertainty surrounding his gay identity:

“There's nothing as a gay man that I can consume in [Latin American Country]. For example, if I look back when I was a teenager, I would just play RuneScape, and then be like, "Okay, let me look at gay things to see if I'm going to be happy in my life." And, of course, everything was foreign. Like, everything was European series or movies made in the United States, but like there was nothing here. And there's also like, no one really that you can talk about it here. [...] God, I remember watching like anything that I could find on like gay people being together and like happy. And like, "Okay, what does it look like? Is it possible?" And back then you might have a series or a movie on, but they would kill one of them or one of them will be a cheater or they would both die. Not only that, but I don't look at all like any of these people [...] It got to a point where I realized [consuming that media] is just making me feel awful because I didn't see myself in any of that.”

While many of the previous excerpts show the learning and discovery process in offline spaces, Robbie provides insight in how online spaces gave a space for him to gain a different perspective on his sexuality:

“Through these games it was like, "This is something that I enjoy." Like, I enjoy playing RuneScape. I enjoy being in this 12-hour long Skype calls with people from everywhere just like doing anything in this game. This authentically [is]

what I like. And these people are also like respecting who I am as a person. And so, it just like allowed me to see that like, "Hey, maybe I can be myself and also be gay, and then I will carry a good life."

Values were also aspects of how some participants understood themselves as they discussed various components of their identities. For Alejandro, advocacy and allyship were important pieces of who he is:

"If I live in a position of relative privilege, I would consider it my fucking duty to make sure that I am leveraging that in every possible way I can, you know? [Either] charitably or just putting my body out in front of other people to make sure that other people have an any amount of an easier go of it than I do."

This aspect of allyship became a foundational component of how he has learned to navigate online gaming spaces. Alejandro explained how he recognizes the privilege that comes along with English being his primary language as a Latino in the US:

"I can speak some Spanish, but it's not as well as my sister and there are certainly people that barely speak English or have a really thick accent. So, you know, they're going to face more discrimination than I do. And if I don't step up for them I'm being a little shit now aren't I?"

Outside Perceptions

"Identities and the way other people perceive them, even if it's not true or not, certainly can introduce where the fringes are. Where people's understanding has this clip right where their empathy ends for the other." - Virgil

The next sub-theme of Self is Outside Perceptions. How a person self identifies and how others will determine what their identities are do not always align. Social spaces

give room for assumptions to be made about individuals. With no way to tell otherwise, there is anonymity of who is behind the controller or computer screen. Concepts such as anonymity, linguistic profiling, display name, and proximity to masculinity made up this sub-theme. How others in the gaming space determined who the participants were based on (sometimes) limited information often contributed to how they were treated within the online gaming space.

For some participants, their racial identity was not a focus when playing online games with other random players. Alejandro discussed how his ethnic identity would not be known without any other qualifiers:

“If I’m walking down the street, like in jeans and a t shirt like people are gonna clock me as being brown, and that’s kind of how it is My Puerto Rican identity hasn’t really come into focus a whole lot [in online games] if someone can’t see me and they’re just listening to my voice. I don’t really have an accent like other people do. And like that that is a huge advantage for me and being able to ingratiate myself into communities pretty incognito.”

The mechanics of the game and gaming space provided some anonymity for Alejandro. Being unable to identify players can also lead to false assumptions of who is behind the controller for others. Lucas shares how his voice would lead people to make assumptions about his racial identity until they saw him or he disclosed it himself:

“A lot of people assume I’m white going in. Mostly from the voice. And then they’ll see my face and be like, “Oh, he’s not white.” So that happens a lot where people think I’m white and then they actually see me. Or I actually tell them, or

I'll be like, "Yeah, I've got some Arabic background," and you'd be like, "Oh, you do?""

Being more deeply involved in the competitive scene in video games, Lucas explains how people from his community would give him fan art and drawing of what they think he looked like. However, most people who did not know what he looked like would draw him as White. Lucas smirks as he begins to explain where the confusion for people typically comes from:

"It's because the accent. That's the problem half the time. If you see the accent, people are like, "Oh it's some posh white kid" [...] cuz I usually use voice chat on Overwatch and that's why [laughs]. But what can you do about that really?"

Misconceptions and assumptions can be made even when players have seen who they are playing with. Virgil shares how being perceived as masculine in spaces has led to being surrounded by problematic conversations:

"I've been Black my whole life. Born Black. I'll die Black and my Blackness often proceeds me. To other folks they just perceive a Black person first and then not understanding me and who I am. And because of the heavy like the politicizing and culture just associated with being Black---especially being Black in America. That has led to a lot of strife and conflict with these other identities because this hyper masculine idea of what a Black man should be compared to what culture used to think and still does think of like a hyper effeminate, sissy type character. I mean, that just almost a divergence right there from like the gay identity and then like the feminine identity cuz everyone just hates women [...] Being a double minority or minority squared, well cubed in my case of being

Black, Queer and not cisgendered. These identities have often been not often internally in conflict but like with external things. So as a male presenting person. people interpret me as male. So like they'll be more comfortable being more transphobic or more misogynistic and especially as we're talking about games and stuff. Hopping on voice chat people hear my voice and they think that I'm a man. So they speak with that familiarity that they wouldn't have until I say like, "yeah, yo thats not cool," or something like that. The identities and the way other people perceive them, even if it's not true or not, certainly can introduce where the fringes are. Where people's understanding has this clip right where their empathy ends for the other."

For some individuals, voice chat was a way for players to determine who did not fall under stereotypical straight, White, heterosexual identities. This lead to various forms of harassment from other players. For Robbie, voice chat was a distressful tool to use in the games he engaged with:

"There was also the time where, like, I'm not fully proficient in English, and so I could mix words up, pronunciation was even worse, and these kids [online], they're ruthless. The second that I conjugated a verb wrongly they go in. And I'm like, "How do I mute these people? Like, stop." And I'm like with my mom sitting there on the TV, and [I'm] like, "I don't know why they're saying that," and yeah. And then if I wanted to like go back at them, I'm just gonna lose my lungs in here, and like it was just like so rage-inducing."

Players would use other indicators to make assumptions of who was not male in the gaming space. Miles shares how his past username would lead to harassment from the *League of Legends* community:

"I remember when I first started League [my gametag] had 'princess' in the name and it ID'd me as a woman. I remember I had this like long like back and back and forth demanding that they like let me change my name for free because I was getting so much harassment."

Miles appeared visibly frustrated when he brought up this memory. He shared how he was unsuccessful in being able to change his name. Robbie shared a similar experience with players assuming his ethnicity due to his name in League:

"My username in League is [male Latino name]. And so, they know that I'm a guy. Well, first of all, they know that I'm not American at least. So a huge thing that I get always is like, "Go back to your country." And I'm just like, "I'm here."

Robbie begins laughing and shares how funny it was for him to hear someone tell him go back to his country in a virtual space. Robbie adds how the character he selected in addition to his name online were combined factors in continued harassment for his sexuality:

"But also just like, because I play support, there's this thing of, you know, like it's so toxic. It's so lame. The ideas that only girls play support, and therefore, also only gays play support. Let's say, maybe I'm not playing as good, [calling me gay] will be the insult. Or maybe I'm doing very good, then the enemy team will be the one like with the insult. It's like, "Yeah, you might be winning, but at least I'm not a queer. I'm like, okay? Mute."

Robbie continues to describe how difficult it can be to escape the harassment and grieving from other players:

“In League, [harassment] happens, and like you're stuck in there. Like you're held hostage. [...] the awful thing about League is the higher rank you are the worse the experience is. For example, I love the Star Guardians skins, and so one of the other champions I play with is Janna [...] that champion has like the reputation that only girls and gays play this character. So if they see you pick that champion, first of all, they think you're useless, and immediately they start like insulting you. I remember one game like I went in, and this guy saw it, and as soon as the game started, he said, "I'm going to make you lose this game." And he did. He ran into the enemy team, and I went like, "Can we surrender?" And he was like, "No." He's just in chat acting like, "No, I'm keeping all of you here." And you can't leave. Because if you leave then Riot is going to ban your account. I was contemplating, like "Was it really worth [losing my account]?"”

Expression

“I'm not going to act this way because you're telling me to do so or because you expect me to do so. and I don't have to prove anything to you about that.”-Jaime

The final sub-theme of Self focuses on how participants express, present, and show themselves in offline and online spaces. Cultural pressures, controlled anonymity, lack of pressure, and encouragement were all concepts that work to make up this sub-theme.

Machismo culture was brought up previously by Roberto in relation to how it impacted how he understood his identities and contributed to feeling conflicted in his

sexual and gender identities. For Jaime, machismo culture was influential in how he “should” express himself:

“Even with my accepting family, there's the assumption of machismo pride, you know? Okay, we know you like everyone, but like, you should act this way. And I'm like, "Well-well, no, I'm not going to act this way because you're telling me to do so or because you expect me to do so. And I don't have to prove anything to you about that. That's one thing I've had to grow up with for so long, I think, and being in Mexican culture, that's like really deeply seated in there [...] It's everywhere, like everyone and everywhere. Like a dude you run past by and it's like, “am I supposed to be doing that too? How do I-- am I- am I running correctly?”

As Jaime describes how apparent the pressures of “being a man” shows itself in his offline experiences growing up, I begin to see how this cultural component of his upbringing creates some hesitance and hyper-awareness of how he expresses himself. This hyper-awareness for Jaime also leaked over into his experiences in online gaming spaces even when playing games with his queer friends:

“So like on Twitch and with friends now I feel like there's like that assumption of like, I have to act this way. Even amongst my queer friends that we have this sort of like gamer mode we go in [...] I guess there's like that hyper-awareness or, like, realizing. I definitely caught myself [thinking], “oh, am I being too flamboyant right now?” And like, “I think I wanna pull in and reel in.” What the frick, right?”

The potential anonymity that comes with online gaming can in some ways provide individuals with the choice to share their authentic selves. For Jackson, he hid behind a different persona in his earlier experiences in online gaming environments:

"I was playing [WoW] 15 hours a day for a while. I don't want to say I was catfishing, but I was. [laughs] I was probably like 14 or 15 at the time and I had just joined a new raiding guild [...] I guess because of my name and my character [other players] assumed I was a girl [...] then everyone just started calling me she and I didn't have a mic at the time, which back then in MMO communities if you didn't have a mic, and you said, you were a girl people were like, "Nah, you're a guy." Like, "No way. You're just saying that to get favors on the game, whatever." But for some reason, these people actually believe that I was a girl. And I was like, "Oh, yeah." Like, and I made up this whole fake name for myself. I had this whole life that I created. I don't even know what my real-life name was. But that was a very interesting like year to two years because, in WoW, I wasn't a Black queer man. I was this 18-year-old girl. I didn't even know what ethnicity I said I was, but I knew I didn't say I was a person of color. I dealt with harassment that women get when they're good at video games because that's what people thought I was, but I never dealt with homophobia or racism."

As Jackson continued with his story, his facial expression changes showing a realization:

"Now that I think about it, part of me thinks that I did that as a form of escapism and like protections and to enjoy the game and just have fun and do my best and not have to deal with [racism and homophobia]. Like, oh, if I'm not a gay Black man, I don't have to deal with all the bullshit that comes along with that. I'll just

be this girl that people assume I am and play the game that way. Which, honestly, I dealt with a lot less shit when I created that persona. But that was a very interesting two years of my life.”

Currently, Jackson presents himself in online gaming spaces differently than he did when he was younger:

“I’ve come to terms with my sexuality and my pro-Blackness. So you’re gonna know that about me, like, the first hour we speak. [laughs] These are things you’re gonna know ‘cause I think it’s important to tell these gaming communities or people that you interact with in gaming that you are.”

Unlike Jackson, Lucas shares how there was less pressure to disclose his sexuality since it was not something people typically asked about:

“I think [my identities are] a bit more chill. So bisexual, like a lot of people sort of write it off and be like, “Oh no, you just straight, bro. Don’t sweat it. Whatever.” Its a lot easier to hide. I don’t have to talk about it and people won’t notice half the time. Sometimes it makes things easier.”

While some of the previous participants shared determining not to disclose aspects of their identities and self, Robbie felt encouraged to share his authentic self when spending more time in online gaming spaces:

“I remember there were three guys specifically, and like they were super, super nice and very kind I told them at individual points [I was gay]. Just making a Skype call with them, just like playing around, hanging out, and then I just told them, and nothing happened. Like it was safe. They just started asking me questions about how was I doing about my sexuality in my real life with my family

and all of that. And then, next day, you log back in and the same jokes and everything just continues as it was. [Then] they started opening up about themselves even more, and, so, that really helped.”

Emotions

Emotions as a theme relates to the emotional and mental impacts on participants due to their various experiences in online gaming spaces. The theme of emotions include two sub-themes: deleterious and contributive. The codes were composed of participants expanding on their experiences in connecting with or being isolated or marginalized within online gaming spaces.

Deleterious

“I think I tried so hard to distance myself from that truth of being gay and being Black because I knew like what that meant to society. I knew what that meant for me. Like, you’re gonna just face adversity and hardships your entire life because of this reason because of the things you cannot control”--Jackson

The first sub-theme deleterious refers to negative outcomes based on interactions and experiences in online gaming spaces for participants. Frustration, isolation, toxic masculinity, exhaustion, shame, discouragement, and lower self-worth were all codes that made up this sub-theme. Many of the experiences shared are due to toxic aspects of online gaming communities and often occurred during social interactions while playing in-game. For some participants, these impacts stay with the individual even after they leave the online game space. Lucas shares the frustration of not being able to determine who will engage in racist behavior until it is said and done.:

It's not like IRL where you can get kind of a good gist of [who is problematic] like a lot of time will be a case, you have to be talking through the text. You can't understand some body language. You can't understand this or that. You don't find out someone's very racist until the point where they say the words [...] sometimes they have to spell out for you online. it kind of sucks [...] There's been problems regarding some racial things that have been said. And it's always frustrating to watch white kids just be like, "Nah, bro. It's fine. Jim said the N word, bro. He didn't mean it or whatever." There's also sticking up for yourself and then also putting TwitLonger that's just defending yourself like putting the N word or whatever. And it's just like, it's so much stupid stuff that happens. You know if it was IRL you would just get punched the hell out. I mean, things go that shouldn't be going. So it's kind of frustrating to watch that sometimes."

Competitive aspects of games can bring out the toxic behavior in some individuals. Miles describes the messiness of online spaces and the competitive aspects of games, like *Overwatch*, can contribute to facing challenges that would be less likely in offline spaces:

*"People get really emotionally invested in [the game] to the point where they're attacking other people that they like don't even know. They probably wouldn't act like that, you know, outside of the game and in real life. Yeah, it's just weird because for me it's, like, I'm hopping on *Overwatch* to relax to have fun to play as *D.va*. And then like I have someone like yelling at me and in one of my ears it's just like a weird experience. And it's kind of disheartening, too. I'm paying the*

PlayStation Online subscription to play this game and also I bought this game for \$60 just to be yelled at? It's kind of like, what's the point?"

Miles utilized online games as a way to disconnect and engage in some forms of wellness. He shared how gaming was a form of escapism from offline concerns. However, these toxic interactions he witnessed and experienced would just add to feelings of isolation he was already feeling:

"You know, growing up where I did in like hetero normative cis etcetera spaces I was already feeling isolated in that space and then it's like when I go online I feel isolated in that space, too. But it's like much more explicit [online]. And so it's like a feedback thing where subconsciously I'm feeling isolated, but now online I can like see it and it's named very explicitly. I want to be a member of that gaming related space or whatever. And then to be rejected or ostracized because of my identity adds that isolation within that isolation."

Many of Jaime's stories involved his time playing *Among Us* with friends and other acquaintances he met online. Disagreement, frustration, and sometimes anger are normal reactions during gameplay. Jaime's strategy for playing this game was different from other people he played with. He shares how accusations of his playstyle turned more personal:

"I like to play [Among Us] in a way that I go by like gut feeling and because I play on voice chat sometimes a lot with friends or, you know, streamers, friends, et cetera, and extended group of people, um, we can hear each other. And I go off of like, well, I know this person tends to talk and act like this, and now they're not, I think it's you. And I'll call them out saying, why are you acting differently? [...]"

It got me to second guess how I was playing because I realized that I'm not, you know, I've been talking about how I play things more emotional and intuitive rather than "logical." So I got self-conscious of how I'm playing the game now. [...] I feel like I had that thought in the back of my head when that whole thing was coming up and probably why I was triggered because like I grew up being told, "You're being too emotional," like "you're supposed to be, you know, robot." [laughs] And I'm like, again I've told people like "I'm not going to act this way just because you assume I should be because I'm a man and this is how men act," I guess it also bothered me 'cause it came off very gaslighty."

Actively participating in spaces where racism and homophobia run rampant can take its toll. Jackson shares how isolating it can feel sometimes within the space and how these negative experiences impacted when he was younger:

"It can be draining and it can be-it can be extremely tough mentally. Feeling like there are not many people who are going through the same experience you're going through or will understand why you feel a way about certain people or why you behave the way you do, or why you don't put yourself in situations."

"I remember specifically I joined a guild [in World of Warcraft]. They were like top 50 US, like a really good guild and before I joined. I didn't know anything about them. I just joined the guild. My first day raiding with them within the first 10 minutes I had heard the n-word-hard -ER 20 times. Probably more than 20 times. And I quickly learned that this was a group of racist White people and this is just how they address anything negative ever. [...] It makes me sad because back then I just dealt with it. I was probably like 15 or 16 and I was like,

"Oh, like, whatever, I'm just going to deal with it. I just want to play with good people and be good at this game. Like this is all I cared about." Now looking back on that, I-- I'm so sad for teenage me having to deal with that and putting myself through that."

"I think I was more just afraid more than anything to say anything. And maybe I didn't even accept my Blackness back then. Maybe I just completely detached myself. I don't know what it was, but I will never forget that experience."

"You know, what's interesting? I feel like when I was younger, especially as a teenager, admitting to myself now, I think I tried so hard to distance myself from that truth of being gay and being Black because I knew like what that meant to society. I knew what that meant for me. Like, you're gonna just face adversity and hardships your entire life because of this reason because of the things you cannot control. You will be judged. You will be harassed like all of these things. So I think, especially at that age, I tried to basically disassociate myself from those identities. I think that's exactly why I said I created that online personality. I think back then, in all honesty, it probably didn't register how it was affecting me but I think as I got older and like even reflecting on that now I'm like, "Wow, that probably contributed to like my own anti-blackness and I didn't even recognize it at the time." You know?"

The discouragement from accepting himself was a shared experience by Roberto. He shares how a moment where another player spewed homophobic comments during and online competitive *Street Fighter* match impacted his comfortability:

“I think [playing online Street Fighter] was the first time that I ever learned that I needed to learn how to block people from contacting me anywhere. But it's always been a very toxic moment that I always remember. It was literally my first experience playing online with Street Fighter. When I saw that one moment, like in rank matches, I kinda got discouraged. Like to me, that was just kind of like, “well fuck, what if like I am gay?” And like, “if people know am I going to be treated different than a kid in a game? Are people gonna target me?” [...] And I'll be honest from that moment I didn't play Street Fighter online for a while just because I didn't feel comfortable, you know? Maybe like, you know, to some people, those words don't have such an impact or they're not, like a trigger word or whatever. But to me, you know, that grew with an oppressive male presence and like getting called like joto or all these things [...] It's like, I don't need this. Like I'd rather just stick to playing alone with the CPU because the CPU can't say to me if it wins or loses.”

These messages were heard in both offline and online settings for Roberto. He continues to share how the combined experiences online and offline contributed to his self-worth:

“It just solidified what I thought the real world was. And growing up, I had the experience, like my dad said because I'm like this people won't take me seriously. Or society said that I can't have a high-pitched voice because I'm not a man or I can't wear pink because of this. [Playing] video games was like the escape from reality and society and hearing it back in a video game [...] it just made me feel like, “oh shit, well then maybe society is like that. Maybe that is the real world.” It made me want to be a little bit more closeted. [...] because it kind of was a

discouraging moment to hear. I thought the real world was different and the real world just told me that I'm a faggot [...] when you're a little bit younger it's impressionable to you that someone from the real world is telling you that you're a faggot."

Contributive

The second sub-theme contributive relates to the experiences that resulted in positive outcomes for participants. Codes within this sub-theme connect to increased empathy, building relationships, validation, affirmation, growth and exploration. Participants described many of their more positive outcomes from their experiences in Discord, Twitch, and in-game when they have more control over who they play games with. The commonality between these spaces and positive outcomes seemed to stem from the connection to their community for participants. Community is a theme that is explored later in this chapter.

Online gaming spaces can be seen as a social space where individuals can connect with others in various ways. For Victor, online gaming spaces provided him opportunities to meet new individuals and consider new perspectives:

"I think there was something to be said about the amount of empathy I have gained over time for people who's struggles I don't even understand. It'll be things like, "I'm here to, you to be able to be comfortable and exist and not feel like constant, grieving in pain." So, it doesn't matter whether that struggle or the struggle that I have or that I even share. I am just-- I just want you to have what everyone else has."

“I think honestly getting to talk to the people that some of these issues intersect with. So, there's a tendency, right, for people who share a struggle to kind of group together in a space. When I got into tabletop spaces, you know, you start talking to other Black people in the space. Then you start talking to, then as a person who's LGBT at the moment, you started talking more about that and being more willing to share that part, the more you find other people like that in that space. [...] I had a person came by [m Twitch] chat we're talking and they're seeing me talk and all this other stuff. And I find out that they are part in the deaf and hard of hearing community. [...] I started to befriend them because they would come by, and hang out and play video games. And I went to go by one of their streams. So, two things were happening here. First thing they were asking me about, "Hey, have you thought about putting subtitles on your-your stream?" And it was one of those-- I didn't think about it because I don't have to. So, then it was kind of like, "But I could learn. How do you do that?" You know, obviously, I like pushing buttons and learning how things work anyway.”

For Jaime, his experiences in online games with his LGBTQIA+ friends allowed for more enjoyment in online games. Jaime describes how playing with his gay friends he has close connections with compares to playing with other random players online:

“Jumping in and finding like [an online gaming] community or just like feeling not so alone I guess in some sense, you know? [...] [Playing Among Us] with [my gay friends] I did the same thing like "You're acting different girl, like it's you," And my friend was like "Uh-huh, honey like you're always coming for my bussy" and I was like "Well you wish, so get over it." [laughs] It was just like we were all

thriving, we were all having fun we knew it was joke we didn't take anything personal. I don't know what the difference was. We were like attacking each other but it was done fun. It wasn't like an attack on our personal selves. I think able to be ourselves, or you know our exaggerated selves and a bit [...] I was just having fun and I was acting”

Jaime continues to reflect on how being able to express himself more authentically positively impacted how he viewed himself:

“It reaffirms who I am I think. I think it also does the opposite but in a good way of like discovering newer things about myself and being like "Wow, this person is talking about their experience with their gender expression." And I feel like, you know- I-I felt similarly. You know I can't think of an exact topic but like they're just wanting to, you know, put a skirt on because they can. It's 2020 like you know? And now I feel empowered that I can go and put on a skirt and feel my oats in it. And just things like that or just feeling comfortable and feeling seen”

Finding the communities and spaces that are accepting can take work and energy to find. Once found, however, these communities can provide a special level of support. Miles expresses feeling validated once he found queer and trans communities through *Twitch* and *Discord*:

“I've kind of found my little community. And it's cool and it feels validating and it also, it feels good, not just from a gaming perspective from also but also from like a trans and like queer perspective too. being kind of in this hetero normative etc. society. It's like being trans can feel really isolating and being queer can feel really isolating so it's nice too. Also, just have that component in addition to the

gaming side of it as well. When you're able to like find those communities and spaces and like kind of stand in solidarity with like other trans and queer folks it kind of like defies that logic that like you know you. Something is wrong with you as an individual. Um, and so for me it's felt like extremely validating and it's felt, you know, empowering in a lot of different ways, I think I've kind of found like my little community. And it's like, cool and it feels validating and it also, it feels good, not just from a gaming perspective from also but also from like a trans and like queer perspective too. being kind of in this hetero normative etc. society. It's like being trans can feel really isolating and being queer can feel really isolating so it's nice to Also, just like have that component in addition to like the gaming side of it as well. When you're able to like find those communities and spaces and like kind of stand in solidarity with like other trans and queer folks it kind of like defies that logic that like you know you. Something is wrong with you as an individual. Um, and so for me it's felt like extremely validating and it's felt, you know, empowering in a lot of different ways, I think.”

In some ways, the communities and connections made in online gaming spaces can offer support in ways that some people may not find in offline spaces. Miles continues to share how his online community provided different affirmation in different ways than his offline relationships:

“So, like I had been really involved with this like trans streamer of color and they're like small community. And like I was part of their discord and stuff. You know, I wasn't like super active in it yet or anything, but I remember I had like shared that like I like had started T. And like, I don't know, just like the positive

response like the automatic like positive response and like the automatic like you know? I felt like people understood where I was coming from. And they, I could tell that they were like genuinely, you know, excited and happy for me. it was just like a different reaction versus like you know when I'm telling like my dad. The, you know, I started T today. And he's like, "...awesome." They just say inherit more like understanding and like affirmation that goes on in that space."

Roberto shared how living in a more traditional Mexican household made it more difficult to express aspects of his sexuality and gender. He describes how experiences in online gaming spaces allow him to feel better about who he is:

"I think the positive moments of [online] gaming being more open about who I am. Like in a game I think, [my online friends] kinda just let me be who I am. [...]my friends, my close friends, the ones that I game out with, they kinda supported [being who I am] a little bit more. I think those good moments and those happy moments are the things that fill me to just keep being who I really am like not try to close it or hide it like I did for the first 20 years of my life. I feel like those things empower me to be better and be more open about it because I know that I wasn't the only one or I'm not going to be the only, you know, Mexican boy or genderqueer boy that is living in an oppressive household that, you know, doesn't wanna be who they are because they're scared. [...] I think creates, like a very big moment of like being a beacon for those people that need to see people like them like being represented somewhere else."

Robbie shared similar sentiments with online gaming spaces. He shares how gaming with friends online provided him an opportunity to explore and come to terms with his sexual identity:

“In RuneScape, growing up, it was at that time where I was like coming to terms just myself. Like not even telling anyone about my sexuality but just kinda realizing it myself. And RuneScape was this space where I was able to kinda explore that, talk about it, and just-- You know, and like, there was a huge group of people, like a bunch of kids from the [United] States. But, of course, they had a different culture. They're teaching me their language, but then in the meantime, like, they're also kinda making it safer for me to talk about these feelings. None of them identified as LGBT or anything, but like they were like very, very good at listening as well just because they had come from a different background. And I made a lot of like really close friends from that [...] it was such an important space for me to have just to feel safe and not feel judged-for who I was at that age where I didn't feel comfortable telling anyone in my life.”

Action

The theme of Action focuses on how participants described how they proactively and reactively addressed discrimination, toxic behavior, or problematic actions from those around them in online gaming spaces. Three sub-themes were identified within Action: accountability, education, and managing the social space. Codes within this theme include calling others in, leaving a space, removing other people from their gaming spaces, and using gameplay. Motivations for engaging in these various Actions

are varied and the determination of whether participants choose to outwardly address behaviors or not are explored during the theme of Maintenance.

Accountability

The first sub-theme of Accountability refers to participants speaking out against problematic actions they witness in online gaming spaces. Codes used to make up this sub-theme include calling others in, holding space, calling out, challenging existing scripts, and reporting. Attention is also given to the challenges faced by participants in utilizing one of these methods to address toxic behaviors.

Addressing toxic behaviors in online gaming spaces can take many forms. Robbie describes how he uses a more direct and caring approach in addressing people using discriminatory language:

“Every time that it happens, I just talk to that person like, “What's going on?” Like I just ask them in chat like, “What's happening?” Like, “Are you okay?” 'cause I don't have it in me to like go back at them [...] When it goes to that personal level, I'm just like, “Okay, what's happening.” Like they're never gonna answer but from personal experience, I know the impact of someone asking you if you're okay has. Even if it's a stranger online thinking or having the reference. They're like, “hey, someone actually asked or someone might care.” It will change the way that at least they start seeing themselves.”

Robbie continues to explain why using this approach is important for him:

“The way that you behave in an online community where you're completely anonymous is 100% a reflection of your internal state. I know that 'cause I think of when I was like 12 [playing] in Runescape. I could have been maybe toxic to

some people because I was just like trying so hard to fit in 'cause I just didn't feel good within myself with the idea of like, I may be- I may be gay. So, I can relate to that. Like I know it's not a personal thing 'cause like if I were to meet these guys in real life they wouldn't say anything."

Other participants did not share the same sentiment to take the time to check in on the perpetrator of harassment. Roberto shares how he uses a direct approach in order to hold others accountable for what they do and say:

"I think also it has to do with like, you know, standing up and holding people accountable and calling those people out is a big thing. If you see something it's not okay you need to talk it out. I always tell my brother and I always check their servers. I always check his and my nephews. Even my nephew, like IRL, he'll say some shit like over the mic. I'm like, "Why the fuck are you saying that?"

Calling out others in order to take a stand against discrimination is not the only important aspect of accountability for him. Roberto discusses how he works to remain accountable of himself and his actions within his online gaming spaces:

"You can't change others, but you can change yourself. [...] I feel like us doing that dumb shit of like, "Let's just take someone out for fun," or, "Let's just talk Spanish so they wouldn't understand." To a point that's also kinda toxic 'cause you're you're not creating a fun experience for everybody else, you know? But like, it's also realizing that as a person, you can change those moments. [...] If you're aware that you're literally online being an asshole and calling people bitch and calling people fuckers and calling people, you know, anything else, like, dude, like you're literally the opposite of what you wanna be [...] it's about

holding yourself accountable from other things that you see other people do and changing those things to be better for the gaming community.”

For Victor, engaging in discussions surrounding issues he sees and knows within online gaming spaces allows for changing the space for the better. Victor points to moments where these call for changes is met with resistance from other players in trying to hold companies accountable:

“We have some notes on hills that people are willing to die on [...] I’m very into story games and [problematic mechanics] ended up being a lot of things in Tabletop games. Video games are where you get to see those [mechanics in action]. You get to see people are having conversations around those things. You get to see people having conversations around those things. Tabletop games, for me, like Dungeons & Dragons and games in that vein were the ones where I got into the most arguments about things. And this is where you start having to not just see these problems but also have to have these discussions with people who are just, like, “But that’s not a problem, though” There was a discussion around orcs that came up, there was discussion around creatures that are typed as evil that came up. There are discussions around creatures that are not typed as evil that came up. And all of it being, “Hey, this is kind of just baked into the lore that the game has,” and someone going, “Well, you can just homebrew it to not make it that way,” and me going, “But I don’t want to have to, like, you know.”

Victor continues to share what makes changes in all aspects of gaming is important:

“We need to talk about the fact that other people are starting to come into the hobby, and the people who are coming into the hobby now aren’t the people who

started this thing back in the '70s. And, that means they're not majority White anymore. You have to deal with that set of dynamics and what all of these previous things might have referenced then that are kind of problematic right now."

Virgil explains how individuals within online gaming communities have also defended the use of racial slurs without acknowledging history:

"I've been in plenty of matches where people have said [racial slurs] or I've seen streamers say it or watch someone get fined for saying stuff like that and then the backlash and the back bending of people to defend the use of slurs by people who aren't from that marginalized community. It's as if they just decoupled the history. It's like they just want this ahistorical vacuum or it's like I can say whatever slur. Like, "I don't want to intentionally acknowledge the history associated with it. I just want the word even though I know the word comes from that. I just want the word without that without the baggage or the history or the consequences."

There's so many folks that want to die on this field this hill of like reclaiming this word because "it's [gaming] culture." But it's not your culture to use it casually. You're using it because of White Supremacy or racism or the patriarchy. Usually, some combination of all three."

The lack of awareness and, in some cases, willful ignorance of some players creates challenges in trying to address racism within the digital space. Virgil shares how challenging it can be trying to hold other players accountable especially in online gaming spaces:

“Folks will just casually use a racial slur in chat and you can see the personal level, or you can even see it with like big name streamers where folks just like want to die on that hill of being able to say a slur because it's “just a word” or it's their- I’m thinking about the meme that’s like “that's just my comfort slur don't take that away for me.” Like, “I just say faggot to let off steam. It doesn't mean I hate gay people like I'm not homophobic. I just slur them.” Like the disconnect there.”

Virgil continues to describe how online gaming communities can make it difficult to hold players accountable:

“I've been in plenty of matches where people have said [racial slurs] or I’ve seen streamers say it or watch someone get fined for saying stuff like that and then the backlash and the back bending of people to defend the use of slurs by people who aren't from that marginalized community. It’s as if they just decoupled the history. It's like they just want this ahistorical vacuum or it's like I can say whatever slur. Like, “I don't want to intentionally acknowledge the history associated with it. I just want the word, even though I know the word comes from that. I just want the word without that without the baggage love the history about the consequences.” There's so many folks that want to die on this field this hill of like reclaiming this word because “it's culture”, but it's like it's not your culture like you use it casually, but you're using it because of White Supremacy or racism or the patriarchy usually some combination of all three.”

Lucas shares calling out toxic behaviors in online games when he sees it, but questions the real impact of even engaging with other players. He questions: if the other players do not care, will they really make a change?

“Usually I’ll just unmute and say, “Shut the fuck up and just mute because what else can you do [...] And I know they won’t care back and I know they won’t like try to change anything themselves. But its like one of those like what can you do? [...] You have to just block, avoid, [and] sometimes report. Just go “next.””

Lucas continues to describe trying to use game mechanics, such as in-game reporting, to address problematic name tags. However, he shares how difficult it can be to make any real impacts:

“You know, obviously, the name tags just goes through. [Players can make] a free account. That's another problem as well because obviously Overwatch you'd be paying for, but you can very easily in Valorant create an account in two seconds with anything that you want. If it gets banned it gets banned. Who cares? You go create anotha one because it's free. No one stoppin you.”

Education

The sub-theme of Education refers to ways participants took time to teach others about their problematic actions or ways of thinking. While educating others is a form of holding others accountable, what makes this sub-theme unique is the choice participants make in following up with educating when they call in, call out, or hold space for others. Participants’ relationship with others, normalizing unfamiliar experiences, and increasing awareness were all motivating factors for spending time educating others.

Jackson recognized that the racial and sexual demographics of the gaming community are majority white and straight. He explains how educating others may contribute to changing how individuals may think or act in the future:

“I feel like [educating others is] important because I think a lot of people that are gay or a person of color-- a lot of straight White men that are a part of the gaming community. They don't have to think about dealing with harassment in the same way that we do. And I think by educating them like, “Hey, I am this and, you know, please don't say these words.” I hope, you know, it leads them to recognize their privilege in that way.”

Jackson continued to share that it was hard to determine if taking the time to educate other players really had an impact due to the randomness and rarity of seeing some of the same teammates again in future matches. Knowing or having a friendship with individuals who are willing to learn and grow was a motivating factor to take the time to educate for Virgil. They share that some people they have befriended in the space have come to them to learn how to be “better” in online gaming spaces:

“Being a male in this space or just being someone is perceived as male there is certainly an element of, like, just general confusion about how to be a good guy. And that's something I see a lot. [This] doesn't necessarily go towards queer males as much as it does heterosexual ones. But just this idea of, like, “I don't know how to not be offensive.” Like “how do I talk to women” or or like “how do I talk to gay men?” One of my friends [...] he's a 15 white, cis kid from [US East Coast State] but we met through Overwatch. And I've watched them and seeing

conversation they've had with other people and just seeing that white team perspective was one all too familiar because it's unfortunately the world. I've seen good people just not know how to, like, how do I live in this like [online gaming] culture. [...] it's so interesting to me because I interpret people having conflict with [online gaming] culture is that people don't know how to not be not center stage. They'll have to not be catered towards. If it's like, if [they] can't easily understand or have some sort of frame of reference for someone else's experience [they] just don't know what the fuck do. and it's a struggle, right? Because it's like you're watching people almost try to walk for the first time, where it's like, literally, you could just shut up. That usually solves a lot of problems."

For Jaime, it was important to address and educate streamers on *Twitch* when they use problematic language or phrasing since *Twitch* provides a platform to reach a wide audience:

"This streamer [had] newly come out of the closet, actually. So, awesome. Props to them. But they're of course still figuring some things out. And, so, they were on stream and they were mentioning how like, "Well, it's like a choice in a sense [to be gay]." And I'm like, "Hmm. I know where you're coming from. And you've discovered this in yourself. And so it kind of feels like, okay, now I'm choosing to accept this in myself, but it's not really a choice" [...] and so it was kind of like interesting. And I said something like, "Well, it's not fully a choice." [...] and then there was kind of apparently some some tension. And that's when I was like, "Okay, I'm gonna leave for now." And they have since then remedied and realized they're still learning and understanding."

Learning and sharing knowledge to educate others went beyond just online gaming spaces for Alejandro. He shares how engaging in sexual and gender diverse spaces in *Discord* has allowed him space to re-think how he understands gender:

“A lot of trans people and a lot of gender queer people and people that have read a lot more about theories in this space has been challenging me. It's been a good challenging but more it has been almost just joyful to see so many collected Queer identifying or LGBTQ etc. identifying people in a space [...] [Participating in Queer-centered discords] has made me consider using they/them pronouns more, not necessarily in so much as that I feel more comfortable with They/them pronouns, as opposed to he/him. I'm pretty confident in my in the fact that I present as masculine. But in so much as if I were to use non-standard pronouns in other spaces like not already like queer spaces that might normal the practice more and it actually has made me think of.”

Alejandro continues to share how sharing how his newer understandings surrounding gender had him work to normalize non-heteronormative ways of being with his co-workers offline:

“I had been dating someone who identified as non-binary and use they/them pronouns. And as a result, they aren't my boyfriend or girlfriend, so I called them my partner. Someone [at work] asked [...] me about my husband. And I was like, “Oh, I'm not married. And, also, I am not gay” and they were like, “Oh, oh my god, I'm so sorry.” [...] part the reason I used ‘my partner’ is because I'm dating someone that is non-binary and therefore it would be not appropriate to call them either of these things [...] I think utilizing my partner has made it so more people

are more accepting of like [...] by making my coworkers accept that they were working with someone that was not in a heteronormative space. I got to educate more people on just the fact that non binary people exist.”

Having the energy to invest in others to educate was an important factor for some individuals. For Miles, he found it important when he was younger to educate and challenge the toxic behavior he witnessed in online gaming. However, keeping up with educating others began taking a toll as he got older:

“[When I was 13] I was like trying to educate [other players] or question them or honestly calling them bad names back. Just sometimes fighting. but not so much anymore. I feel like this simultaneous desire to like not let those things go unchallenged. I have a very strong value in like speaking up and doing the right thing when you're able to. At the same time, I've acknowledged more that it's draining on me. I have my own internalized transphobia and homophobia and stuff like that. And it's like, you know, I suspect that a lot of it comes from being in [online gaming] spaces so much. Especially when I was so young. It's like, Am I really going to be able to, like, change someone's mind on Reddit, you know? Probably not. And you know, it's probably going to do more harm to me than it is going to be doing good for them. Um, so I try and avoid it.”

Managing the Space

The final sub-theme of Action is Managing the Social Space. This sub-theme refers to the ways in which participants determine who they will no longer play games with, potentially leaving a space, and shutting people down through gameplay. Codes that make up this sub-theme include shared values, inclusive space, ‘get gud’ mentality, and

pushing others out. While previous sub-themes focused on more one-on-one social interactions to address toxicity, this sub-theme focuses on how participants' choices influence their engagement with communities and overall game spaces.

In my conversation with Lucas we discussed how social and political issues at the time of the interview, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, influenced who he kept in his gaming circles. He shares how he has moved more towards people who share similar values and beliefs while moving away from other people who do not:

“Especially recently with the [Black Lives Matter movement] I've almost like blacklist and remove people just from my like peripheral vision that are just being stupid. You know, saying stupid stuff like doing stupid stuff just. [...] I think [current events] directly influenced by my background and everything else that's kind of shaped a little bit, I guess. For me, aside from moving myself more towards other POC. So like I [play] League, for example, with our mutuals. It's always fun because like it's always nice to have other people who are kind of similar around”

Alejandro values welcoming and inclusive *Discord* spaces. He gives some time to “feel out” the place and based on what he sees he makes a decision to stay or leave:

“If I see people doing some racist or sexist or otherwise bigoted shit and no one in that community is going to call them out or even supports them or laughs with them. Fuck it. That's not worth my time or energy. Simultaneously, I feel better about going to spaces that are more inclusive [with] gender identities and sexualities outside the norm. [In those spaces] I know that at least on some level

there's going to be an attempt made to counter some of that bullshit [...] I find very welcoming and makes me want to engage with it more."

For some participants, they would use their skills or how they play the game to challenge and push back against other players. For Roberto, playing online with someone he knew offline impacted the relationship:

"[My friend] is like the epitome of a hyper-masculine Mexican boy and I'm the opposite of [him] and I've never gotten really along with him, but I'll play anyone in Smash. feel like straight boys think they command video games and just because I'm gay [they think] I'm going to have lower video game skills. [...] He was very adamant of playing me in Smash and I was like, "Okay, cool. Like, let's do it. Let's hop online. Like, let's post up man. Like, let's do it." And I remember 3-0ing [...] We have a group chat with all my little Mexican friends [and he] texted in the group chat. He was like, "I just destroyed this fuck- I just destroyed this fucking asshole," and I was like, "No, you fucking did it." Like, "I destroyed you like three times." He was like, "Why are you lying?" And I was like, "I'm not." He was like, "andale joto" and I'm like, "Okay, fine. All right." So then I was like, "Let's go again then." Then another fucking 3-0, and I took a picture of you, like, "So then I just hurt you, right?" all these, like, hyper-hypersensitive and like defensive mechanisms [...] Some people are very competitive by nature [...] but it's like, you just lost, you don't need to start calling me, a fucking slur. You don't need to start telling me that I'm a cheater, like, calm your shit down."

Roberto continues to share this friend was the only person he removed from his gaming spaces:

"I think [my one friend] is the only person that I've ever cut out from like playing video games with because I think that first impression of Smash was not last time we played. I really did wanna give him a second chance, but I think after the fourth time that we gamed and he kept having these tantrums and these, you know, complexity issues. And, you know, at times, you think it's funny and it's joke but like actually hearing him in voice and seeing that stressed out like, yell and like all these things I'm like, I don't wanna [keep playing with him]. That just doesn't make the game fun for me. And, at that point, you know, any time he was like, "Hey, you wanna Smash?" I'm like, "No, thank you, I'm good."

Maintenance

The previous theme of Action focused on the external processes' participants engaged in to address or mitigate toxic behavior. On the other hand, Maintenance focuses on the internal process in maintaining their wellness and determining if and how they will expend energy. Sub-themes within Maintenance include real-time assessment and boundaries. Codes that contributed to the development of these sub-themes include navigating when to leave or stay in a space, uncertainty, power and influence, and purpose for gaming.

Real-Time Assessment

"How much of your brother's keeper do you want to be?"-Virgil

The first sub-theme of Maintenance is Real-Time Assessment. This sub-theme refers to how participants process and determine if they are going to address toxic behaviors and gameplay around them. This includes the consideration for the emotional labor participants would expend in addressing other random people online. Many

participants wrestled with how much they are responsible for individual actions when most interactions are random strangers online. Some participants also questioned the role of gaming companies in these issues and wondered how much change they could actually make in the grand scheme of things. Codes for this sub-theme include lack of consequences, gaming goals, emotional labor, uphill battle, connection to aggressor, comfort, and power.

Roberto shares how lack of consequences online make figuring how what to do difficult:

“Sometimes it's just better to stay quiet and not trickle feathers, which in reality, like in person like that, I wouldn't be the type of person. But in a gaming experience, like I feel like when people turn on you for a certain thing like you're screwed for the entire game and it just makes the game unplayable for you. It just makes it an unenjoyable experience to just be targeted in a game. Just because I feel like those online gaming moments give people a reason to be who they are without any consequence. And, you know that's kind of sad and bad, but that is the thing, you know. People can take the time to be a little bit more hateful online because sometimes they can spread their hate or their violence, like in a video game, like online without having any consequences. And that's true because it's just a game”

Wanting to enjoy the game without having to worry about calling out toxic behaviors was important for Robbie as well since he focused more on the competitive aspects of gaming. He continues discussing how he re-assesses and changes his approach if reaching out and checking in does not work:

“If they respond with a bunch of slurs, then I'm like, "Okay, goodbye." 'Cause at the end of [the day] I'm just playing a game. Talking to you, it's going to distract me from the game, and like, that's not what I'm here for. Like, if you wanna talk after the game, fine. Like maybe I'll have the time off or feel like it. But like, if they're trying to just bring me into that loophole of just insulting each other like I'm not gonna engage with that”

Virgil describes the losing battle and emotional labor they consider when determining if they will or will not take action. In the end, Virgil ensures that what they do will not come at the expense of their own wellness:

“[Pushing back] losing game because there is no winning. And sure, you can put in like the huge emotional efforts have the real conversations but who's going to fucking do that with every random ass person that they talked to online like there is just. it is a zero-sum game. It's an unwinnable game. And when it comes to gaming with friends online, at least a person can feel a little bit more agency or effectiveness [...] talking to their friends like “Yo, that's not cool like stop using slurs like say something else like stop it.” But just like when you're just talking to the masses, like the comment section everyone's gonna have something stupid to say. Just all kinds of it's like racist, misogynistic, transphobic, whatever like that's it's been accepted as a part of online gaming culture. [...] In practice, the world is a lot shittier than you as one person can handle and just so much inertia to go against [...] I can't tear myself into knots trying to always intercede for other things.”

Jaime shares similar sentiments of not wanting to exert more energy than he has available:

“If it's like a streamer, I just pass by like not going to maybe expand that much energy or if it's like some random, like granted my first League match scarred me a bit, but like, if it's another one I might not so much care anywhere because like, whatever, you're just, this is the community and I can't fix the entire community right now. So, it really depends on the energy.”

Navigating offline friendships in online spaces can also muddy the waters in figuring out what to do. Miles discusses how he would see other sides of his offline friends playing in online gaming spaces with a mix of offline friends and other random players:

“When I was first starting to play Overwatch and league, I was always playing with someone, especially if I was going to be doing competitive and with the comms and stuff. And it was usually like a guy friend that I had. I just remember my guy friends would be like really aggressive like in the comms as soon as someone started something like, you know, just like sparked off this whole argument. They would be yelling at each other and calling each other slurs and stuff like that. And these are people that I would like work with and go to school with and stuff. And it was almost, almost like a like a completely different kind of side of them. And it's stressful for me too when I'm not even like participating in the argument. It's just like overhearing it. People getting like super heated over this one match that didn't go so well. And then those same friends, we would hop

on Monster Hunter world and it would just be us laughing and like having a good time and getting our asses beat by like a T-rex that breathes fire.”

Miles continues to reflect on other moments when determining what leads him to push back against others. For him, responding to toxicity with his own toxicity is tied into how he sees and understands his own identity as man. He shares:

“When I play online I also often respond to toxicity with my own toxicity. [It’s] a way of me asserting my legitimacy as a man. The thought occurred to me when I talk about trying to educate and challenge toxic behavior. I think feeling insecure about my masculinity and also feeling burnout from trying to educate others has led me to be toxic in some instances, but it also brings up whose labor it is to educate people in those instances. I think my frustration and burnout is valid, and I was also playing toxic games when I was already feeling frustrated from being isolated and experiencing stigma at school.”

Victor shares in the frustrations of trying to fight this uphill battle. He elaborates that part of the difficulty in addressing challenges is due to lack of accountability from gaming companies:

“[Gaming culture] is very much a minefield, very much a minefield. And the reason that it is that way, which is frustrating to me and continues to be and is something that I will lay very squarely in the lap of the gaming companies more often than not. So you can't do anything about individual actions, and that part is fair, right? I can't tell Riot that the fact that someone got to you a game and started to type terrible words into chat is their fault exactly [...] [Games] have a set of moderating. You have, like, things you can put in your programming, you

have report tools, you have moderating tools, and you have terms of service or, you know, user-end agreement-- yeah, user-end license agreements or whatever that you could adhere to, but you don't. Because you don't, I have to deal with that. So it's me having to mute people in chat because you didn't do a thing that just blocks like slurs from being said in chat that you could have, but you didn't. Or someone does something that is egregious and terrible and wrong in public spaces, and you could, as a company, decide to speak out about those things on your platform because it is your platform, and it is not, like, a public utility or government utility, but you didn't do that. So now I have to figure out how to mitigate that and moderate that and work around all of that stuff. And the reason why the ends are being so frustrating is because the people that I play with, for the most part, don't necessarily look like me, which also means I have to talk to them about why this stuff is an issue because they don't see it as an issue because it doesn't impact them. So now I'm in the middle of this game where I'm trying to relax, having a moral debate on about whether or not these words are used and which terms are slurs, and the identities that are impacted about these."

Jackson shares how addressing toxic behaviors in larger communities can be frustrating and lack of consequences makes it feel futile to change:

"I've dealt with this in guilds where someone will say something racist or homophobic or whatever it is just some hate speech in general, and you know, I'll tell someone in power in the guild like, "Hey, this person is saying these things, like, I don't feel comfortable. Other people also don't feel comfortable, blah, blah, blah, blah." And it's never handled. It's never once been handled in a way that I

feel was acceptable. Usually, it's like, "Oh, I was with them." Like, "Hey, stop saying these things you're offending people," and then like, that's it. And they won't say it again when we're in a call together, like when we're raiding together but I'll hear like later on like, "Oh, this person is still saying these things like, in certain like isolated private chats. And in those situations, it's hard because I'm in a group of 20 people that depend on me, and do I let this one person allow me to quit, you know, raiding with these people or playing with these people or do I just ignore this person and just continue playing with majorly people that I enjoy being around who are not like that? I think that's more so what I've leaned into doing is just ignoring that person and, you know, moving on because I think it's for the betterment of everyone."

Ensuring others do not feel uncomfortable in the exchange seemed to be an important factor. Jaime discusses how where the behavior happens can play a role in how he goes about addressing behaviors he witnesses:

"In a voice chat, it's like, okay, I could say something and, everyone's gonna hear it. And, you know, and everyone's going to feel the tension I think. Whereas, everyone has more confidence just typing things out and saying like, stop, like you need to stop, you know? Um, so it really depends. I think when I'm in a voice call, I will type it out rather instead, and like send a direct message, then it's like, "Okay, Hey, I don't wanna make everyone feel awkward," again, if it's explicitly really bad. Um, but yeah, I'll send a direct message, usually over voice if it's a voice call."

Not having much influence in online gaming spaces leads to feeling as if they have not much impact in situations. On the other hand, some participants describe how being in positions of power or leadership roles gives them more confidence to address and stop toxic behaviors. Virgil shares how his position in a community can influence if he will take action:

“I feel like if I would describe it if online games were a crowd, and I'm just part of the crowd. I'll stop someone from getting like fucking murdered and assaulted. Just, just as a practice [...] There's just too much to fix. And there's only so much one person can do. And there's only so much one person can control who gets to them. I'm just a random stranger, too. But if it is a Twitch, a Twitter, or Discord something where it's not as anonymous, then I can use my position in the community that I could use like my mod status to affect some sort of change or, at least, stop, somebody from going off the rails [...] So, my position of, like, yes, you're supposed to be responsible for this crowd, then yes, I do feel more compelled to be like, No, stop it break apart blow the whistle, whatever. So yeah it mostly just depends on what my role is in this?”

While Lucas shares similar thoughts when he is in a leadership position, he also discusses what he believes the best course of action is in addressing toxic behaviors:

“If it's usually in a community I controlled or community I'm very affiliated with usually I'll say something. If it's like some Discord or like Twitter [...] I will usually like block or whatever because at that point. Sometimes people say things for attention. If you give them that attention, they're more likely to do again like on Twitter, especially. Because I get people we say stupid stuff just to like try and

get a reaction out of me. It's like I ignore that hundred percent. Its just like if they're obviously given that reaction, they'll do it again to someone else to do it again. To me, it's just like just wasting everyone's time obviously if I block them. Then after reacting too, then they'll be like "I got further over that. They blocked me off this and that." And that it's like sometimes you just gotta just got to ignore them [in public spaces]."

Victor on the other hand has a different perspective on giving people attention:

"Blog posts and forum posts and all of that, where there was that general rule of, "Hey, don't feed the trolls." If someone does something or says something negative in an online space, what you're supposed to do is ignore them because these people just want attention. And if you give them attention, they will continue doing the thing. If you don't give them attention, they will stop doing the thing. And what we have found out through years of scientific research and people's suffering is that this is, in fact, inaccurate in, pretty much, every respect, people are just going to continue to be terrible until you do things with the tools available to you that force them to be less so because there are consequences."

Boundaries

The sub-theme of Boundaries refers to ways participants protect their mental capacity to handle situations and maintain their wellness. Codes that contributed to the development of this sub-theme included avoidance, muting others, muting self, limiting time, and taking time off. Many of the following are a result of actively experiencing toxic behavior from other players. For some individuals, being aware of their past

experiences in certain communities were factors in determining how they would prepare themselves if they chose to engage in those gaming spaces.

Jackson talks about how he would avoid certain games due to certain communities being known for being toxic. Having to avoid certain spaces was an area of frustration for Jackson since he would like to learn and get better at certain games.

However, the communities make that difficult:

“Honestly, I think I've avoided a lot of competitive games for that reason. [...] I definitely steer more towards MMOs and, not specifically, competitive gaming, like Overwatch or anything like that, which is a strictly competitive game. Which makes me kind of sad, because I feel like I like a lot of these games, that's what I'm trying to say. I like playing them but I don't put as much time into them even though I would like to, because I don't wanna deal with the harassment that's gonna come. If I do play, I try to play within a group of friends, you know?”

Jackson continues to discuss how even when he attempts to play some of these games he is met with harassment. He shares how muting other players in a game will make it more playable for him, but it can come at a cost:

“Interestingly enough, Valorant, it's my first real shooter because I purposely avoided shooters because if you go on Twitch and you look at who's playing shooters it's like 99%, straight White men. You go into their chats and it's just-- it's so toxic. And I was like, "I don't even want to get into community." [...] But something about Valorant interested me. So I downloaded it, and the same thing that happened in League [...] I just immediately mute my team and the other team because I don't want to deal with the racism, the homophobia like-- especially in

shooters I feel for some reason the first thing they go to insult you, it's like, the N-word or it's like some type of homophobic slur. Regardless of if they know what or who you are, that's just the first thing I feel like the gaming community jumps to for some reason, too. I don't know to make someone feel bad or call them out. So, yeah, even at Valorant, I just-- I mute everyone and just play in silence. [...] it's just upsetting that-- I mean, I don't have to do that. I technically don't have to do that, but I also just wanna play the game and have fun and not have to be called slurs in the game. [...] I hate [muting people automatically] 'cause there might be a chance that there's someone in this game right now that is a good, nice person that I could make friends with. But the opposite of that is just so bad that I'm like, "Fuck it. I'm just going to mute it and just forget about it.""

Victor shares how being bombarded with racist names and slurs led him to also will use the muting function in game to avoid harassment. However, with racism coming in different forms there was only so much he can do to mitigate it:

"You get into League of Legends, and you run into people with certain words in their usernames. And I'm like, [gaming companies] do have access to a whole list of terms that are used. It's like slurs and things. [Companies] really could just put the programming in here to say, "If you have words that contain this sequence of characters, we will not make you make a username with those because that's inappropriate, but [they] didn't. So now I have to deal with, you know, um," [sighs] So now I have to deal with like MoonCrickets61, or, like, PorchMonkey420, or something like that, who's decided that they want to appear in my game for whatever reason and then start throwing out slurs for people when

they don't smite dragon on time. And it's like, frustration? Fair. This? Entirely too much. You need more people who are willing to punch you in the mouth if this is something that you're willing to say in an online space. What that led to was starting to play more rank games where this is a lot more frequent than not. A friend giving me a piece of advice about these things, although they had different reasons. They gave me a piece of advice that has served me well in almost every game that I played, which is literally: mute everything. Like, mute chat, so you cannot read the hateful things that people are saying. And you can mute names, like, emails this person send or whatever else so that you don't have to-- like, you just do not have to deal with these things. And you can just report their name at the end of the game, because apparently, this person is just on one and just needs to be removed from space as a whole, really."

Many online games rely on communication between teammates to be successful and meet gaming objectives. Miles also shares avoiding talking in voice comms in-game but will not mute other players in order to be able to be less at a disadvantage in games:

I try not to [use voice comms]. I feel bad because it's like, especially for a game like Overwatch comms are really important. So I do keep it on. I usually avoid talking nowadays and sometimes I'll just completely turn it off. I'll just be like, whatever, like people can spam emote at me like, I don't care. Like, I'm not gonna listen I just want to play D.va in peace [...] t's like stressful and I feel like I'm kind of the go to target for [discrimination]. I mean, I'm not gonna lie, I'm not particularly good at Overwatch or League. So like I could see why someone would get frustrated at me, but it's like it's still like such a stressful experience.

For something like Overwatch you really need a lot of communication, especially when you're playing competitive and so like it kind of got to a point where I was just like I'm going to leave like the comms on, but I'm going to avoid talking and I'm just going to kind of like listen to like the hate and like the negative feedback.

Miles continues to share how his mental state helps set boundaries on how he will continue to engage in the games he plays:

"I try and be very intentional about what is my mental state right now. Like, am I in a space where I can hear this, you know, for the duration of like a 30 minute or hour long match or whatever? If I can. I like try and only be with you know other trans people or people of color to help mitigate some of that. Because when I was young, I was just playing a game online with my friends and I didn't really know it was [toxic]. I mean, it's just like a really bad experience and so I try and be very intentional about it and be very aware of how I'm feeling. And as soon as I'm like not having fun I'm going to stop playing and do something else"

Protecting his mental state was also important for Jackson. He shares how his mental health is an active consideration for him and finding people he can play with has helped in online gaming spaces. He shares:

"I feel like because I have carved out these small communities for myself I'm at a point where I just won't play a game if I feel like I'm gonna be subject to [harassment] no matter how much I wanna play it, you know? There are millions of games that I enjoy. I don't need to put myself in that situation. If I can get friends to play, sure, then I'll play that game. If not, then it's fine.

Jackson continues his reflection and shares how his age has impacted how this has changed for him:

“I think [my] mindset has changed. 'Cause I feel like 10 years ago, I would have been the complete opposite 'cause I was so focused on being the best and as good as I could and competitive, but now I feel like I value my mental health and my happiness over being good at a game or whatever else it may be because mainly I don't have time to play as much as I used to. So [I get a] few hours a day, if that, to play a game, I refuse to be put in a position of being upset or feeling like I have to get in an argument or educate someone or X, Y, Z, you know?”

Lucas reflects as well on his younger years was a time with less boundaries and how he would join in with the toxic behaviors with other players:

“People tend to be a little bit more aggressive [online]. I think like some things in the game community that take me back [...] I spent a lot of time on Tumblr when I was younger as well. So, it was bit more like accepting coming on to the Internet [...] and then people are just spouting like rude things. It's like not surprising. Takes you back a bit. Hardens you a little bit but you just kind of sit there. Maybe sometimes it can make you perceive the world and in a really bad way. And then you remember like, no. It's just the internet. People are idiots here. It does kind of make you start to undermine opinions, a little bit. And there was a period of time, I had a little bit of a God Complex 'cuz of the amount of time I spent on the internet talking to idiots.”

Virgil shares that there are moments where it is best for them to take time away from online gaming spaces in order to maintain their wellness:

“I remember there was recently this player I fucking hung out with and stuff. He got accused of being like transphobic and stuff. And I was just, like, I’m going for a hike and it’s like no phone. Do Not Disturb. I just went for a hike walked around came back and then addressed it. Whereas everyone else is like pulling out their hair [...] sometimes you gotta log off. I don’t know what to tell you. It’s definitely a balance of recognizing that it’s not that serious but it is that serious. And for me [with] my identities and having navigated all this I just feel that I have a better tolerance for it, but then also I have enough wisdom or experience to be able to take a step back, or to do something like for my own self care.”

Community

The theme of Community shares participant experiences and stories that describe how they find, form, and maintain relationships within online gaming spaces. Sub-themes within Community include Finding Existing Spaces, Connecting with Others, and Creating Spaces. Some of the previous themes have a heavier focus on the toxic components that make up online gaming spaces. The theme of Community shows the inclusive and welcoming side of online gaming spaces.

Finding Existing Spaces

The first sub-theme in Community is Finding Existing Spaces. This sub-theme focuses on how participants worked to locate communities within online gaming spaces. Participants in this section discuss using in-game searching features, *Twitch*, and *Discord*. Many participants used their own identities to inform the types of spaces they searched for and felt included in. Game mechanics, server lists online, recommendations from friends, and meeting people in game are all potential avenues discussed in this sub-theme.

Alejandro discusses how his participation in primarily LGBTQIA+ *Discords* and communities has led him to meet more queer video game players and get introduced to different types of games:

“I’m in Discords for various games that I enjoy generally but I have my core friend group that I play games online with we pretty regularly. We’re all in one Discord that’s got, let’s see 30 people in it. Probably I know like five of us ten of us will rotate through playing games together. [...] As a queer identifying individual, the more people that I’ve met who similarly identify and even just as an LGBTQI-etc individual [...] Maybe it’s a confirmation bias or have you but as a result of that I’ve been involved in more spaces, made more connections, and have Discord friends. I’m invited to random servers and I see people playing a game and I try it out and then it just keeps going forward from there.”

Games have included different mechanics in order for players to find each other through various means. Virgil shares how they utilized a “Looking for Group” search feature in *Overwatch* in order to locate other people to play with that played similarly. Over time this group of friends became his primary friend group to play *Overwatch* with:

“Overwatch released this thing where the Looking for Group. That’s where I was just able to just start to say, like, hello. Mic only. Comms. Must know what “group up” means. Things like that. And then just eventually over the course of the year. I just found this group just like it’s a growing group of six years of people to game with consistently. [...] It was a really fun but intense time because we were kind of cut throat. [...] it was it was it was fun. It is fun. It was a fun

experience but just thinking about what was happening, like the actual like character arcs and like the drama of it was just so much fuckin fun.”

Twitch has a feature using “tags ” that can help viewers find streamers in various categories. At the time of this interview, LGBTQIA+ was the only identity tag available on the platform. Jackson shares how he uses the LGBTQIA+ tag on *Twitch* in order to find other content creators that share similar experiences as him:

“I specifically only watch queer streamers or I watch people who are playing, like Valorant, for example, I’ll watch people that are good at the game, but even then, I don’t watch like the top streamers, I find people who are someone of color or has like the LGBTQ tag, and then try and learn from them. A big streamer, it’s dealing with [toxicity] in chat and having to read it I don’t feel like. [...] I also feel like I tend to veer more towards like smaller streamers that have smaller view counts, ‘cause the community is just better, I feel like, there’s less possibility of trolls and just, you know, racism and homophobia there too.”

Finding communities and being surrounded by individuals with similar identities seemed to help Jaime feel like he belonged in the gaming space. He shares the importance of him finding other queer communities on *Twitch*:

“I think the first thing coming into this community finding other queer people, because I felt like that would be a safer space somewhat. I’m still looking for others who like gaming in general, who maybe are queer. You search them out, but there’s- I don’t know if it’s in my head only, but, there’s like almost a sense of like difference [with non-queer communities]. There’s definitely like an otherness at times for myself. It might just be hypersensitivity to like, “Okay, this is who I am

and that's who they are." Coming into [queer communities] was welcoming. I think that's one of the bigger things of the streamers that I encountered at first. They were very welcoming. And so, it made me feel like, "Okay, I want to get into this Twitch." Not like streaming, but like the community in general. I want to get into these Discords cause it's like hanging out with people. And also, at the time, coronavirus was limiting my interactions with real-life people, you know, IRL."

As shown previously in the Contributive sub-theme, finding communities can yield positive impacts. Miles discusses further the importance of finding other trans and queer streamers:

"On Twitch like I've made it my mission to find as many trans or queer streamers as much as I can and it's been nice being a part of their communities and joining their Discord and getting to chat with people and just talk about games with people who are similar to me. That's definitely made like the community feel more inclusive for me. And it's kind of solidified like my identity as a gamer."

Although tags on *Twitch* can be a helpful tool in finding queer content creators and gamers, Jackson shares how the use of the LGBTQIA+ tag by straight and cis "allies" can make it difficult to find other LGBTQIA+ folks on *Twitch*:

"I personally don't think [straight streamers] should [use the LGBTQIA+ tag]. And the only reason I say that is because I think a lot of people that search for that tag specifically, they are looking for members under that umbrella term to connect with and, you know, join a community of LGBTQ+ people. Not to say that we don't want allies in those communities, but it's like, we're specifically looking for streamers and people to support that are queer. And if you're using that tag,

like you're taking space away from those people that do identify as that. Like you're taking that platform or what could be a platform from them or viewers for them to yourself. I think that's a little bit selfish and, like, just don't use the tag. Like be an ally, don't use the tag. It's that simple, in my opinion.”

Connecting with Others

Connecting with Others is the next sub-theme in understanding the theme of Community. This sub-theme focuses on how participants felt when finding communities and people. This sub-theme refers to contributing factors for participants to determine individuals they felt comfortable around, feeling part of a larger community, and the importance of finding others with similar identities.

The appreciation and involvement in gaming can be a connecting factor for some people. Victor shares how gaming is one of the primary places where he is able to connect with people. For Victor, online gaming is not just for the fun of the game but also an opportunity to spend time with others

“The thing about gaming and online gaming spaces is that a lot of them foster relationships to people and carry relationships to people. So, a lot of the relationships I have with people in my online spaces- until we get to know each other as people, which can take a while, depending on the person [...] that's important, right? Because the context of our friendship is we talk together while we play this game. I have friends that I enjoy talking to, but the only time that we get to talk to or catch up with each other is on Monday when we play Monster Prom. So, the underlying thing is, games are a really central part, a really big central part.”

Jaime shares how online gaming spaces have made him feel less alone since he was able to spend time and play with others. As he got older, he shares how he learned he felt disconnected when engaging in spaces with majority white, non-queer identifying people:

“Warcraft [when I was younger] made me feel less alone at [...] it wasn't in-person contact, but it was at least something. I felt connected. And [other players] were nice, so why not? [...] more recently now, I finally have run to the people that it's not that they're like blatantly rude or toxic to me as a queer person or Mexican person, but they just don't have those in common. And especially nowadays with the new Civil Rights movement [...] these topics come up really co-commonly but just someone's thoughts will come out while they're streaming. I've heard things said that are just- they're not blatant racism or homophobia, but [some White, straight streamers] haven't fully thought out what [they're] thinking.”

Jackson shares how engaging with LGBTQIA+ communities he has discovered and engaged with adds a level of safety and security:

“I'm definitely protecting myself and allowing myself to enjoy the game a lot more without having to worry about speaking in Discord or whatever else, [...] if I wanna play a game, like Valorant or League or something, god forbid, I'll either go into one of those Discord channels that I'm a part of from like those queer streamers or friends that I have and ask anybody want to play. I try to make sure that if I'm playing an online game, it's with people, or at least that my teammates are people that I know and people that I like and like to surround myself with. I

rarely like doing like Solo Queue or, you know, just anything like that. So I try to make sure that I keep those spaces positive in any game that I play [...] I think it's more so just finding communities of people that look like me and identify like me to be like, "Okay, I'm not the only one that feels this way. I'm not alone. I'm not this alien from another planet." You know, [laughs] there are people that are going through the same experiences as me and finding comfort and like solace in that."

For Robbie, being able to find LGBTQIA+ content creators that played at a competitive level allowed him to not only relate with others in competitive *League* spaces but also combine two important aspects of himself:

"Twitch has been like one of the nicest things that I started getting into this year, mostly. Before I would watch Twitch like here and there, maybe watch some professional League games and things like that. This year, I started finding LGBT creators and finding myself just really relating to them just as individuals. But then also really enjoying the content that they're making. Because there are things that are part of the community that you don't get to experience in gaming. So then, to have those two combined was just so much fun to see. In League there's a [trans streamer], and I remember, I found her channel and immediately subscribed [...] if I'm the 1% of skilled players, she's like the 0.00.2%. And then, all the jokes that she's saying during the stream and all of that is like, I get it. Like I relate 100%. And it's like the things that I find funny. It's the media that I consume. [...] And then, the nice thing that comes with [finding LGBTQIA+ streamers] is the chat. It's a place of also a lot of LGBTQ people where they're

safe to meet one another [and] to get a group of friends to play games with. [...] I think there's a very powerful thing of Twitch right now for LGBTQ people. If I look back when I was young gaming, I thought of [being gay and being a competitive gamer] as so separate. Like, here's my gay life, here's my game life. They can't-- Like, there's no way to relate the two."

Miles shares his surprise and excitement in being able to find and engage with more people of color and trans individuals in gaming:

"Gaming spaces where it's mostly like trans people or where people of color is, like, this whole other side of gaming that I never knew about. I just remember when I was growing up and was really into games. My cousins would be like, "Oh, you're such a tomboy. You're such a huge nerd for liking that kind of stuff." Now that I'm finding spaces or there are people who looked like me and who are like me who can have conversations about gaming. It's fun."

Lucas describes how being able to engage with friends with similar identities allows for opportunities to connect and joke about culture without offending or explaining what the jokes are:

"Even a small thing like joking about things that are more specific to like family and stuff. For example, like I'm messing around with some [friends] and there are certain jokes you can make. For example, a lot of my family is African but a lot of em speak Arabic and stuff. So, me and like another person with the same background can make a jokes about- like we will mess around. It's just different. It's different interactions you can have while its usually linked to your background and the things you know. It's just things from the past or things from growing up

and stuff. So, its usually more a familiar ground there. While with the everyday person I can't usually talk about that kinda thing cuz like they don't understand it. Or, like if they do understand that like [they] don't really get the joke.”

Jaime also describes how there is a disconnect when in a space with white content creators:

“In-game or even on the stream, if a person is just kind of-- [laughs] It's gonna sound so bad. If they're like very White in a sense I get bored very easily. I feel bad saying that, but like, you know, [chuckles] I will get bored easily and I'm like, "Man, I don't feel the vibe. I don't feel the energy in the sense and this channel for some reason." And it tends to be white folks. Not necessarily all the time [...] if something just feels too Wonderbread, I'm not gonna say anything [in Twitch chat]. I think it's more of an appreciation for like other cultures and not that the channels aren't appreciating the culture. It just doesn't seem that that audience is there or present or that they like address [culture] [...] it feels like they're in their own little bubble.”

Creating Spaces

The final sub-theme of Community is Creating Spaces. This sub-theme refers to how participants have worked to create their own communities through guilds, *Discord*, and *Twitch* streams in order to create more inclusive spaces. Participant stories in this sub-theme discuss the importance of carving out spaces by creating their own guilds and intentionally cultivating their *Twitch* communities.

Some games provide ways to create and manage a group of players to exclusively game with and complete missions. Jackson discusses what lead him to create his own guild for *World of Warcraft* with one of his friends:

“There's no reason for me to even have to deal with [harassment] anymore. Like, I can control the people I play with if I put the effort in to create that environment. And my friend was like, "You know what? You're right. There's zero reason for us to have to deal with this toxicity in this game when we can just know people before they come and join the guild." So that was majorly why we did it. We wanted to create a space where anyone could join and feel comfortable and be accepted [...] If you feel like you're in a welcoming environment, you're gonna play the game better. Like, period. Like, that's it. So yeah, we did it for us and for everyone else in this community that feels they have nowhere to really go and feel safe [...] we are very big on having an accepting and open environment where everyone can feel comfortable. Even on our application, we have like a pronoun section. we made sure to include everything[in the application] so people feel like they can be safe and not have to deal with the bullshit that comes with playing online games. That's a major reason why I decided to start this guild in the first place was because of all the past history of homophobia and racism that not me, but a lot of my friends that play this game dealt with.”

Jaime has gotten into content creation on Twitch and believes it is important in creating a space that is inclusive and welcome for people from diverse backgrounds. He shares how he works to create an inclusive space, especially with language:

“In the past, I've been bullied. I've been mistreated because I'm not super masculine. [I work to] really take that into my streaming space. I don't want anyone to feel uncomfortable. I don't want people to use certain words that are even, you know, subtle things [...] I personally won't try to avoid saying 'dumb', 'Dumb', or 'lame' because of how casually ableist, those words are. That's a big thing. People have been like, "Why don't you say that?" I've said it on streaming and go, "Ooh, I don't want to say that anymore. I apologize. I'm backpedaling. And I don't want to say that anymore." And people have been like, "Why are you saying--" like, "Why don't you say dumb and lame?" And I'm like, "Because they're casually, ableist like [...] that was a word originally that meant dumb [...] so I'm not gonna use those words.”

Robbie has also engaged in content creation in various ways. He shares the importance of remaining authentic and creating communities and content that is not only meant for white, straight audiences:

“If you're going into content creation with the goal of not having a white audience, you're not gonna have a white audience. I think authenticity is what people engage with. If we're just gonna [engage] with Twitch I am not gonna watch someone sitting on their computer for hours if I can't relate to them. And if someone's fake during those four hours, it's gonna show. I think with identity parts of yourself like, you just have to claim the space for yourself. Like even if that means that like for four months no one's gonna engage back with it. That doesn't matter. I think it's just more for a responsibility with yourself. But I think like as we go, more people from different backgrounds are going to want to have

this media to consume. And the Colombian kid is not gonna be watching someone that he doesn't even understand their language. He's gonna want someone who's speaking Spanish, and who's talking about things that he saw in his neighborhood during the day."

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, LIMITATION, AND IMPLICATIONS

Five main themes and several sub-themes emerged from the data. Chapter Four discussed the themes and sub-themes through the organization of participant stories and experiences. Chapter Five will discuss findings within the context of the study's theoretical underpinnings (Black Cyberfeminist theory). Strengths, limitations, implications, and areas for future research will also be discussed.

Alignment of Theory and Themes

Black Cyberfeminism was the foundation in analyzing the data, uncovering codes, and understanding the lived experiences of participants. As discussed in Chapter Two, Black Cyberfeminism is a framework that examines how digital structures influence practices in online spaces, and also how individuals, specifically Black women, continue to resist the digital manifestations of misogynoir (Richard & Gray, 2018). Where Black Cyberfeminism separates itself from other digital feminist theories is the attention to structural inequalities and the acknowledgement of the role that identity plays in the participation in online digital spaces. Additionally, this theory gives attention to the role of identity in how marginalized individuals navigate digital spaces. The inception of this theoretical frame was to understand the experiences of Black women and diverse women gamers within the digital space. Although participants in this study do not identify as women, Richard & Gray (2018) acknowledge that men's experiences are varied and impacted by the same hegemonic structures within digital spaces. As such, this analysis reflects on the lived experiences of participants and the aspects of privilege,

marginalization, and access. There are three tenets which make up the core of Black Cyberfeminism: 1) social structural oppression of technology and virtual spaces; 2) intersecting oppressions experienced in virtual spaces; 3) distinctness of the virtual feminist community. These tenets are more fully explained in Chapter Two. The following will connect how these tenets show up in various ways within themes and sub-themes.

Self

The Self theme had three sub-themes: Understanding, Perception of Others, and Expression. The sub-theme of Understanding was critical to gain insight on the distinctness of lived experience due to intersecting identities and how these identities cross between both offline and online spaces. It also provided the foundation for understanding how individual's identities inform their worldviews. Black cyberfeminism emphasizes that we as individuals can never detach ourselves from our identities in both offline and online spaces (Gray, 2012a, 2017; Richard & Gray, 2018). Participants discussed offline experiences that contributed to their identity development and the relationship between the various identities that make up who they are.

Perception of Others, the second sub-theme, focused on how others interpret participants' identities. Gray (2012) refers to marginalized individuals in digital spaces as being identified as "deviant" and, as a result, be faced with discrimination. Participants shared the various ways they were identified as "other" in their online gaming spaces and had to endure harassment from other players. There are several methods that are employed to determine who the person is on the other side of the screen. Gray (2018) explains that linguistic profiling is one method utilized by individuals in digital spaces to

determine who does not fall within stereotypical white, straight, male groups. The type of accent and its proximity to whiteness was one aspect of this profiling. Robbie and Roberto would experience racist and xenophobic behaviors from other players for using Spanish or having a Spanish accent. These experiences align with findings by Gray (2018) where Latinx women experienced xenophobic forms of harassment due to being seen as “non-American.”

One participant benefited from being linguistically profiled by other players since he would be initially read as white and straight in gaming spaces. Black Cyberfeminism recognizes that individuals may hold some identities that can be marginalized within a space while simultaneously carry with them privileged aspects of identity (Richard & Gray, 2018). For Lucas, others hearing his accent would often result in being misread as white due to its association to a British accent. Additionally, he shared that people would also be unable to assume his sexual orientation just from hearing his voice. This provides a different perspective in understanding “deviance” in a digital space is not a reflection of the individual, but rather of the culture (Richard & Gray, 2018). Masculinity and heteronormativity are components of online gaming culture. There is potential to experience less harassment if the social space does not identify a person as falling outside of that realm. The perceived identities (white and straight) based on limited information (voice) afforded an ability to “pass” as white and straight. A privilege in online gaming spaces that allowed Lucas to “vibe” more in comparison to other participants.

A unique piece of the interactions related to language that stood out to me was the centralization of the United States. Robbie’s experience in being told to “go back to your country” while participating in a digital space where it is not uncommon to play certain

games with other players in different parts of the world. The assumptions of who belongs in a game space are embedded within game culture (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Gray, 2018; Mortensen, 2018) and perpetuated by game development (Brock, 2011; Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007; Mou & Peng, 2009). Many video games lack representation of race, diverse language, and even geographic location. This contributes to the centralization of white, male experiences within gameplay.

The final sub-theme, Expression, refers to how participants express, present, and show themselves. Aspects of masculinity also presented itself in various narratives from participants. Two Latinx participants discuss how machismo culture influenced their identity development and expression. Masculinity and societal pressures of “manliness” have been shown to impact queer men in various ways such as internalized homonegativity (Szymanski & Carr, 2008) and negative feelings about being gay (Sanchez, Bocklandt, & Vilain, 2009). Participant stories aligned with these findings. While the previous studies did not delineate if these messages occurred offline or online, this dissertation gives additional insights on how masculinity and patriarchy continue to persist in online spaces.

Richard and Gray (2018) emphasize that marginalized individuals cannot detach themselves from their identities when entering an online space. The inability to remain anonymous in digital spaces opens up marginalized individuals to experience inequality (Gray, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2016; Ortiz, 2018, 2019). Stories from participants seemed to highlight that choice and autonomy to disclose their identities connects the inability to blend in. Scholars have argued that who is behind the controller is often assumed to be white, straight, and male without any information to prove otherwise

(Cote, 2017; Gray, 2014; Nakamura, 2012). For some participants, components of their identities, real or perceived, aligned with assumed whiteness or masculinity. Lucas, for example, experienced others assuming he was white and straight due to the sound of his voice. Although frustrating at times, this misconception allowed him the opportunity to choose if and when to disclose his racial and sexual identity. For other participants, being perceived as not falling into these dominant identities due to their voice or name online takes away their choice to disclose. Since disclosure in some spaces can result in harassment, having the choice to disclose is a privileged action within online gaming spaces that is not afforded to marginalized individuals.

Emotions

The two emotions sub-themes, deleterious and contributive, focus on the various impacts of navigating digital social spaces that have not been made to include Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC). The sub-theme of deleterious was the result of shared narratives surrounding experiencing toxic behaviors in online gaming spaces. Anti-blackness, patriarchy, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination cross the borders between offline and online spaces (Richard & Gray, 2018). Toxic behaviors directed at historically underrepresented individuals often take the form of racism, sexism, and homophobia among others (Consalvo, 2012; Gray, 2014, 2016; Kwak, Blackburn, & Han., 2015). Discrimination in offline spaces negatively impacts mental health and self-esteem (Lowe, Okubo, & Reilly, 2012; Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2012; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Striken, 2012). These negative outcomes were similar when discrimination occurred in online spaces as well. Participants shared how experiencing toxic behaviors would result in negative emotions and, in some cases,

impact how they see and accept aspects of their identities. These impacts stayed with participants even when they turned off their games. As emphasized by Black Cyberfeminism, these shared experiences further show the ways online experience are not “less real” just because they occur online (Richard & Gray, 2018).

Racial identity being a core component of how individuals see themselves has been associated with higher levels of stress (Caldwell, et al, 2002). Caldwell and colleagues (2002) explain this possibility may be due to the increased awareness of forms of discrimination that would contribute to higher levels of stress in individual’s lives. On the other hand, other scholars argue that higher levels of centrality for racial identity can act as a buffer against discrimination and mental health impacts (Cross et al, 1998, Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003, Sellers et al., 1998). Most of my participants were over the age of 25. Many of their stories tell how being a witness to or experiencing discrimination in online games had bigger impacts to how they felt about aspects of their identities when they were younger. Jackson and Roberto had shared how participating in these online gaming spaces at a young age contributed to negative feelings about his own racial and sexual identity at the time. These messages were often received in both offline and online spaces. Gaming has been accepted to be a potential avenue for wellness and de-stressing (Jones, Scholes, Johnson, Katsikitis & Carras, 2014; Kaye, Kowert & Quinn, 2017). However, BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ individuals are not afforded the same access to “detach” from reality. As reminded to us by Black Cyberfeminism, their identities, and the negative messages surrounding those identities, cross over with them (Richard & Gray, 2018).

The second sub-theme, contributive, relates to experiences that resulted in positive outcomes. Online spaces have provided opportunities for LGBTQIA+ individuals to explore aspects of their sexual identity and try new forms of self-expression (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Gray, 2017; Griffith, 2003). The third tenet of Black Cyberfeminism describes how digital media has often been utilized by marginalized communities to fulfill needs and work towards empowerment (Richard & Gray, 2018). However, the onus for carving out these spaces are on the marginalized individuals. Several participants shared feeling validated, affirmed, and able to be more their authentic selves once they found their communities. These positive outcomes were a result of the additional work participants put into finding communities and people who aligned with their values and identities. The path for participants to engage in online gaming spaces in authentic ways was carved out by these individuals and communities. Many of these positive experiences occurred through interactions cultivated through private *Discord* servers where participants had more control over who they were surrounded by and gamed with.

Many participants shared aspects of their offline experiences that contributed to feelings of isolation and shame due to social and cultural stigmas. The online component of the digital spaces allowed participants to connect with people and communities they may not have available to them in offline spaces (Kaye, Kowert & Quinn, 2017). Participants confirm how online gaming spaces allowed for opportunities to connect with and feel affirmed by individuals they may not have crossed paths with in offline settings.

Action

The theme of Action refers to how participants proactively and reactively addressed discrimination and forms of toxic behaviors in online gaming spaces. Resisting oppressive forces is another key aspect of Black Cyberfeminism (Richard & Gray, 2018). It is not uncommon for the burden of addressing discrimination often falls on marginalized communities. Several participants questioned: “If I won’t say anything who will?” and also “Why can’t I just play the game without having to worry about it?” In online games, the software and mechanics in game do not effectively mitigate harassment and discrimination. The burden to address these moments then falls on the people at whom the harassment is directed.

Openly and directly challenging and addressing forms of oppression and harassment in digital spaces is important to push against the normalization of oppressive forces (Gray, 2020; Richard & Gray, 2018). Participants shared various ways they work to address toxic behaviors in online spaces. While actions such as calling in or calling out would occur with random teammates, participants discussed taking more time to educate if the person causing harm was more well known to them.

Transgressive play refers to a type of play practice that works to resist various forms of oppression (Gray, 2014; 2020). Originally, transgressive play referred to the unique ways in which women use play to resist patriarchy within digital spaces and an aspect of Black Cyberfeminism (2018). This framing of resistance can also be seen in aspects of how Roberto, Virgil, and Miles push back against expectations of harassment within online gaming spaces. For Roberto, he utilized his skills in fighting games to shut down players who used homophobic slurs towards him. Miles and Virgil would resist

expectations of how they “should” play in *Overwatch* and instead played games how they wanted to regardless of what their teammates would say or do. Their existence in the space as Queer People of Color already disrupt who the space was created for and their gameplay becomes an extension of that disruption.

There was a distinction between the genre of game and the general culture of the game’s community. Games that were more competitive in nature (*League of Legends*, *Valorant*, *Overwatch*, *Among Us*, *Street Fighter*) resulted in more discriminatory experiences. The competitive nature of games can oftentimes bring out trash talking between players. Trash talk is normalized within the competitive setting, however, can often take the form of racist, sexist, and homophobic rhetoric (Cote, 2017; Nakamura, 2012). Most experiences of harassment shared by participants occurred in games that had a competitive aspect to the game. Robbie and Roberto’s experiences give insight on how competitive trash talk can turn into personal attacks.

Maintenance

The theme of Maintenance refers to the internal process in maintaining wellness and determining if energy will be expended to address toxic behaviors. The first sub-theme, Real-Time Assessment, discusses what participants considered before making a decision to act or not. Participants shared a conflict between wanting to intervene and but believing the end result (often times no real change) would not be worth the energy exerted. Many participants share aspects of powerlessness when playing alone in team related games. The randomness of player matchups and the rarity of being matched with the same player(s) again in follow up games resulted in less commitment to act. Aligning with a Black Cyberfeminist perspective (Richard & Gray, 2019), rather than seeing

participants and being powerless in these situations, I would argue that various forces of power contribute to disempowering individuals in online game spaces.

The mechanics and development of games is not made to consider historically underrepresented individuals (Brock, 2011; Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007; Mou & Peng, 2009). Many participants shared the lack of accountability that exists in large part due to gaming mechanics. Some participants share how reporting players for engaging in toxic behaviors rarely result in any “real” change. Lucas mentions how players with racist in-game names are oftentimes throw away accounts and having an account reported or banned usually results in players just making new accounts. Victor's commentary on the software development for online video games is a reminder that game developers are actively choosing to not create software that would block racist and other forms of offensive names and thus add a layer of protection for historically underrepresented individuals within the space. These experiences from participants align with previous scholars' discussions of online gaming spaces being constructed and maintained to center whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity (Core, 2017; Gray, 2014; Nakamura, 2012).

The sub-theme of Boundaries describes the ways participants protect their mental wellness. Previous research has shown men of color report becoming desensitized to toxic behavior in online gaming spaces in order to better cope (Ortiz, 2019). Participants in this study did not share becoming desensitized by harassment in online gaming spaces. Choosing to not react in order to not appear as “sensitive” in the gaming space was one aspect of this study that some participants aligned with. Participants also share additional tactics they employed in order to mitigate harassment including muting self and others,

taking time off, being selective of who they played with, and avoiding certain games and spaces. Many of these tactics align with strategies used by women in online games (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017). Many of these overlapping tactics appear to be related to aspects of masculinity and gender since participants who engaged in these similar tactics discussed being perceived as “not manly” in the space.

Community

Black Cyberfeminism argues that marginalized individuals work to utilize and repurpose the tools they have available in order to actively resist structural oppression in digital spaces (Richard & Gray, 2018). Acts of resistance can also come in the form of establishing communities in spite of the oppressive forces at work. Historically underrepresented individuals carve out their own “safe spaces” in order to mitigate the amount of discrimination they face in online gaming spaces (Gray, 2011, 2017; Richard & Hoadley, 2013). Additionally, being the leader of a guild or streamer for a *Twitch* channel gave a couple of participants the ability to cultivate the type of inclusive community they wanted since they were in charge of the space. These directly controlled spaces served as a protective factor for some and allowed control in who participates in their gaming spaces. Multiple participants shared how they utilize *Discord* to connect with other Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC) in gaming spaces. There was an intentionality for participants in how they determined in which spaces they would engage. Participants shared using tags (a searching mechanic) on *Twitch* to locate other QTPOC streamers and gamers. Once participants determined a community was inclusive and safe, they would join that community’s *Discord* in order to create deeper friendships and find people to game with. Findings from Richard and Hoadley (2013) suggest the

creation of community guilds and gaming spaces specifically for marginalized individuals can act as a protective factor. Findings from this study align with this perspective as many participants describe feeling safe and welcome when finding other people like them.

Many participants share the importance of finding communities and individuals that align with their own identities. Findings by Ghabrial (2017) suggest that LGBTQ-POC feel disconnected in the LGBTQ community when sexuality is the only aligning identity. Several participants shared similar feelings and preferred engaging in spaces where more aspects of their identities (race, sexuality, and gender) were more likely to be understood.

Strengths and Limitations

There are both strengths and limitations with regards to this study. One strength of this study is the exploration of an area in digital studies and identity that is underrepresented in research. This study expanded on current discourses that work to understand the unique experiences of historically underrepresented individuals in online gaming spaces. A second strength of this study is the participants who shared their stories. Participants showed vulnerability and transparency about the challenges and the victories they experienced are part of these digital spaces. As someone who considers himself an active gamer, I have a personal understanding of the challenging experiences that come from participating in online gaming spaces. I am also aware of the empowering pieces that have me continue to participate in spite of those negative experiences. These experiences provided me with a foundation to understand participants and their experiences.

This study is not without limitations. The first limitation to this study is that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This created unique challenges and barriers in connecting with participants and conducting this study. Due to academia and the majority of careers moved to virtual settings, I met with participants via ZOOM rather than in person. This pandemic has also impacted the mental health of individuals around the globe (Pakpour & Griffiths, 2020).

The second limitation is the use of one interview to capture the experiences of this group of participants. Interviews averaged between an hour and a half to two hours yielding rich information and descriptions that allowed for valuable data. Additionally, interviews were used as the primary and only source of data. To address this limitation, I used member checks and debriefed with one of my committee chairs during the analysis phase. Member checking allowed participants opportunities to provide feedback and clarify anything they believed I misinterpreted. Majority of participants shared they had no adjustments and nothing additional to add. Two participants continued to keep in touch throughout the process to provide adjustments and insights on their words and stories. I appreciate their support through this process and the different perspectives they provided in understanding their stories.

Implications

There are various implications for this study and could potentially impact different areas within gaming as well as the field of counseling. This study highlighted the experiences of nine Queer People of Color and their individual experiences in online gaming spaces. The themes identified were self, emotions, action, maintenance, and

community. The insights uncovered from participant narratives and themes can inform aspects of gaming and the counseling field.

Implications for Gaming

Gaming lacks representation in multiple ways including in-game characters, in the game development process, and who is chosen to represent and participate in eSports (Brock, 2011; Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007; Mou & Peng, 2009; Nakamura, 1995). This lack of diversity and representation within the game field contributes to the insulation of oppressive structures that perpetuate harmful narratives of historically underrepresented individuals. As discussed by participants, being able to see and connect with others who hold similar identities can make the gaming experience more enjoyable and increase the likelihood they keep participating in the space.

Current online gaming mechanics and software do not actively work to mitigate harassment, discrimination, or hold players accountable due to lack of consequences (Fox & Tang, 2014; Richard & Gray, 2018). If games are developed with the intention of having consumers enjoy their products, then developers need to intentionally consider how their gaming mechanics (or lack of gaming mechanics) work against the humanity of a large part of their consumer base. Many gaming companies have been more vocal in their support for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities in more recent months. However, without actively addressing their communities and gaming software, their support is merely performative.

Gaming companies utilize mechanics in-game, such as reporting systems, to flag problematic and harmful players. As shown by various participants, reporting rarely results in users being held accountable since individuals can just create new accounts.

Some games utilize bans on IP addresses which ban the user based on their internet router rather than just the account. This has a deeper, long-lasting consequences to actions for players with a static IP address. However, this method would not be helpful for those who have the means to change their IP address.

Software in games should work to intentionally protect marginalized individuals in online gaming spaces. Victor described how harassment can sometimes come in the form of racist player names. Many racist terms and phrases used as names in game are not new. Developers need to take the time to create software that detects and rejects players from creating usernames with racist, homophobic, and sexist foundations.

A misstep by gaming companies that is often criticized by marginalized video game players is the lack of diverse individuals that make up the gaming development teams. The gaming community is full of talented individuals who work to make the gaming space inclusive and welcoming to all. Players have a history of modifying games to add aspects of fun and depth to the experience. For example, Xmiramira and Ebonix are two Black women content creators who added customizable content to *The Sims*. They added more accurate skin tones and hair styles for Black players to be able to create avatars that looked like them and their communities. *The Sims* team utilized these talented individuals by bringing them on board for consulting and, even more importantly, paying them for their ideas and labor. Companies would benefit from following similar tactics by not only engaging its community in development and enhancement processes but also hiring diverse content creators as part of their staff. Furthermore, gaming companies would be able to create more accurate depictions of

diverse characters and stories by intentionally hiring individuals from various diverse backgrounds.

Implications for Counseling

My work as a counselor and supervisor within the counseling field has been influential in how I see potential impacts. As a counselor who has worked with primarily kids and teens, I am aware of the extent my clients engage in online gaming spaces. Many participants shared that some of the more lasting negative impacts on identity occurred when they were younger in these online game spaces. Clinicians should be willing to and actively explore not only what their clients may do in game but also their social interactions within these spaces. Some participants shared not being able to share some of these more negative experiences due to gaming interactions not being taken as “seriously.” Clinicians taking the initiative to understand and accept online experiences as real and valid may provide opportunities for exploration, growth, and resiliency. Additionally, my extended work with parents has provided insight on the lack of understanding of what *actually* happens in games, *Discord*, and *Twitch*, are less known by parents and guardians. I have been able to demystify the “gaming world” for my clients’ parents and provide insight on how their children spend their time and grow certain skills in game. Parents in turn have been less dismissive and shown more interest in understanding what their kids do in games beyond just having fun.

The findings of this study show how involved individuals can be in online gaming spaces. It would benefit clinicians to increase their awareness and familiarity with these platforms as technology evolves and becomes a more normalized component of everyday living. One of the first steps in this process is for clinicians to recognize their

own bias and assumptions about gaming and those who play games. Participants in this study use gaming as a core aspect of how they socialize and connect with others.

Intentionally or unintentionally dismissing gaming experiences from clients can leave us in the dark about a large component of their experiences. If our work is to understand our clients holistically, then we need to accept that the virtual is part of that holistic understanding.

I challenge clinicians to actively explore with clients their experiences with video games with give attention to the social aspects of their playtime. Findings of this study provide insight that, especially for QTPOC, interactions with others online can be both supportive and isolating in various ways. Clinicians can ask questions surrounding the types of games clients play, who they play with, and what types of social interactions happen online. Clinicians can utilize *YouTube* and *Twitch* to learn more about the games their clients mention. Learning about how games are played and the culture around them can provide important insight on an aspect of clients' lived experiences. This becomes especially important for younger clients. As shown in some participant stories, experiences surrounding discrimination had great impacts on identity development and added to feelings of shame. Recognizing the real impacts of these online interactions can allow counselors to work with their clients in healing and developing positive views of their identities.

Several participants shared careers and hobbies that are connected to video games. Gaming and content creation have become viable ways to gain income in the past few years. Streaming gameplay, creating videos, multimedia and art commissions, participating in eSports, and joining local and regional competitions are just some of the

ways individuals have earned income through gaming. Clinicians who engage in career counseling with clients interested in some of these avenues would benefit from learning more about opportunities that exist surrounding the video game industry. Moreover, understanding the unique barriers that exist for QTPOC is important in connecting individuals with appropriate resources and minimizing potential discrimination.

Therapeutic gaming is an emerging area within the counseling field (Madeira, Postolache & Correia, 2011; Noda, Shirotaki & Nakao, 2019; Oren, 2008). Existing resources and literature that focuses on therapeutic gaming is primarily focused on board games and other offline games. Video games have been shown to allow opportunities for individuals to explore aspects of their identities in unique ways (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Gray, 2017; Griffith, 2003). Bringing video games into the therapeutic space can provide opportunities to explore and understand aspects of client experiences and identity in unique and interactive ways (Matthews & Coyle, 2010). As with any other therapeutic approach, clinicians should be aware of how they are intentionally utilizing gaming and the ways in which it aligns with the therapeutic goals set by the client.

Suggestions for Future Research

Findings of this study are still a recently new area of exploration within gaming studies. Further research will be critical in order to expand our understanding of diverse experiences and eventually develop and support the tools and resources needed to support and empower marginalized individuals within online gaming spaces. Nine participants engaged in this narrative inquiry. Although meeting the criteria for this research, participants' race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identities were somewhat

varied. Future qualitative research would benefit from focusing on specific intersections of identity in order to tease out and understand the uniqueness of experiences.

Additionally, while none of my participants disclosed a disability, understanding the role of disability and disability identities would be critical. Moreover, most of my participants were in their mid-20s or older. It would be interesting to explore the experiences of individuals who are younger and in the age range for when identities are developing and influential.

A component of the framework of Real Virtuality (Castells, 1996) helped ground how I understood the meeting point of offline and online experiencing converging to create a holistic experience. Online gaming is an active process that takes place in multiple spaces which can include: offline through actually sitting at the computer/console, in-game during gameplay, Discord as a form of communication, and Twitch through engagement with an audience. At any point an individual can be engaging in all or a combination of these spaces at once. Future research can explore the multifaceted way individuals engage with online gaming and how each space contributes the immersive, continued experience.

My participants engaged in multiple games from various genres. These game spaces are unique in their own cultures, social expectations, and communities. Future exploratory studies could work to understand how these unique cultures and how they work to include and exclude individuals.

Moving research from generating knowledge to action is critical for social change. Majority of my participants had strong passions for advocacy and vocalized wanting to see change occur in the development and maintenance of online video games.

However, many of these same individuals felt the burden of their voices being ignored by gaming companies. It is important to find ways to develop resources and tools that will support the advancement of historically underrepresented individuals in positions of power and influence within the gaming space. This includes the development of avenues for LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and other marginalized groups to participate in eSports, gaming media, and other opportunities in equal numbers to white, straight, cisgender video gamers.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide an in-depth look into the experiences of Queer Black and Latinx masculine identifying individuals in online gaming spaces. It utilized Black Cyberfeminist theory to understand the role of identity in participants' decision making and how identity is impacted by experiences. Findings in this study yielded implications for gaming and the counseling field. Additional research is needed to expand our knowledge of other diverse groups, analyzing the differences between gaming genres, and identifying forms of advocacy and action being engaged in by marginalized groups in online gaming spaces.

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APPENDIX A: Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Carlos Medina and I am a doctoral candidate in the counselor Education and Supervision (CES) doctoral program at The Pennsylvania State University. Under the advisement of my dissertation chair, Dr. Richard Hazler, I am conducting my dissertation research about the identities and experiences of Queer Men of Color who participate in online gaming spaces. This study has been approved by the Penn State IRB and is being conducted for research purposes.

In conducting this research, I aim to provide insight about the unique experiences and impacts of online gaming spaces on the identities of Queer Men of Color. Additionally, this research aims to illuminate the ways in which identity plays a role in how Queer Men of Color navigate these environments. My goal is that this information will facilitate developmental strategies that will increase the number of people of color and LGBTQIA+ individuals in gaming and provide clinicians insight in how to work more effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds who engage in online gaming environments.

Queer Men of Color who participate in this study will be asked to complete confidential individual interviews via phone or online video call. Interviews will be audio recorded and last 60-90 minutes.

I am seeking participants who identify as Black or Latinx, a sexual minority (i.e. gay, bisexual, pansexual, etc.), male, over the age of 18, and currently engages with online gaming environments where audio communication and/or text chat is used as a component of gameplay at least 5 hours per week.

If eligible and willing, please contact me at 210-931-0004. Or, if you know any other individuals who fit these criteria, I would sincerely appreciate if you sent this message to them as well.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

APPENDIX B: Initial Questionnaire

- 1) How do you identify in terms of race/ethnicity?
- 2) How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation?
- 3) What online games do you currently play or have played?
- 4) Email address:

APPENDIX C: Consent for Exempt Research

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Experiences and Identity of Queer Men of Color in Online Gaming Environments

Principal Investigator: Carlos Medina V

Telephone Number: (210) 931-0004

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Richard Hazler

Faculty Advisor Telephone Number: (814) 863-2415

You are being invited to volunteer to participate in a research study. This summary explains information about this research.

- **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to gather information that will provide insight of the impacts on identity of Queer Men of Color in online gaming spaces. This project aims to understand the lived experiences of Queer Men of Color and the role identity plays in navigating and making decisions in online gaming spaces.
- **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to participate in an individual interview. Interviews will be audio-recorded. You can choose not to answer questions you do not feel comfortable answering.
- **Potential Risks:** There is a risk of loss of confidentiality if your information or your identity is obtained by someone other than the investigators, but precautions will be taken to prevent this from happening. The confidentiality of your electronic data created by you or by the researchers will be maintained as required by applicable law and to the degree permitted by the technology used. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.
- **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. All data will be stored in a secure digital dropbox and will be password protected. Only the primary investigator will have access to these files. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

If you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you should contact Carlos Medina at 210-931-0004 or Richard Hazler at 814-863-2415. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject or concerns regarding your privacy, you may contact the Office for Research Protections at 814-865-1775.

Your participation is voluntary and you may decide to stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

Please tell the researcher your decision regarding whether or not to participate in the research.

APPENDIX D: Interview Guide

Before beginning interview clarify what identities related to gender, race, and sexual orientation.

1. *Generative narrative question*: Can you tell me the story of what it is like for you* to participate in online gaming spaces? Please include everything you find relevant about your experiences and add as many details as you would like.
 - a. Follow-up on topics they introduced using their language
 - b. [If not mentioned] How did you get into gaming online? What keeps you participating?
2. How do your experiences in these online gaming spaces influence your identity?
 - a. [If not mentioned] How did offline experiences reinforce these ideas
3. How has your identity played a role in how you make decisions online?
4. [If not mentioned] Can you tell me more about things you do offline?
 - a. How do your offline experiences influence your experiences in online gaming environments?
5. How would you define activism? Do you do anything online that you would categorize in this way? Offline?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not covered?

* Replace “you” with using their identity so there is focus. For example, “Can you tell me the story of what it is like for you to be a Mexican Queer man in online gaming spaces?”

APPENDIX E: IRB Approval



Office for Research Protections
 Vice President for Research
 The Pennsylvania State University
 205 The 330 Building
 University Park, PA 16802

814-865-1775
 Fax: 814-865-8699
 orp@psu.edu
 research.psu.edu/orp

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION WITH LIMITED IRB REVIEW

Date: July 15, 2020

From: Brigitt Leitzell,

To: Carlos Medina

Type of Submission:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Experiences and Identity of Queer Men of Color in Online Gaming Environments
Principal Investigator:	Carlos Medina
Study ID:	STUDY00015409
Submission ID:	STUDY00015409
Funding:	Not Applicable
Documents Approved:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HRP-590 - ORP Consent Guidance for Exempt Research.pdf (0.02), Category: Consent Form • interview protocol.docx (0.01), Category: Data Collection Instrument • IRB (0.03), Category: IRB Protocol • recruitment email.docx (0.02), Category: Recruitment Materials

The Office for Research Protections determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, met the criteria for exempt research with limited IRB review according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.

Continuing Progress Reports are **not** required for exempt research with limited IRB review. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the Office for Research Protections closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research with limited IRB review need to be submitted to the Office for Research Protections as described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the Office for Research Protections.

CURRICULUM VITAE: Carlos Medina V

EDUCATION

Present Ph.D. Counselor Education and Supervision, The Pennsylvania State University
2014 M.A. Clinical Mental Health Counseling, Texas A&M University-San Antonio
2012 B.A. Psychology, St. Edward's University

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

LLED 297A: Language, Literacy, and Technology (Summer II 2017-2021)
CNED 595: Counseling Practicum (Co-Taught) (Spring 2017; Spring 2021)
CI 497: DC Social Justice (Co-Taught) (Spring 2017-2021)
EDUC 100: First Year Seminar (Fall 2020)
RHS 403: Medical Aspects of Disability [Online] (Spring 2017, Summer I 2017, Spring 2018)
CNED 555: Career Counseling (Fall 2016)

CLINICAL & PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

2016-2021 Doctoral Practicum Supervisor, Herr Clinic
2017-2019 Clinical Mental Health Counselor, Taking Flight Developmental Center
2017-2019 Process Group Facilitator, Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity
2016 Group Counseling Facilitator: Masters Level Interpersonal Growth Group

PUBLICATIONS

Hinojosa, T. J., **Medina, C., V.**, & Mudge, S. (2019). A multicultural and social justice counseling competencies debate. In M. Pope, M. Gonzalez, E. Cameron, and J. S. Pangelinan's *Experiential Activities for Teaching Social Justice and Advocacy Competence in Counseling*.

Hinojosa, T. J. & **Medina, C., V.** (2016). Lesbian narratives: An investigation of identity development and expression. *Journal of Counselor Practice*, 7, 21-40.

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

Burgess, D. & **Medina, C., V.** (2021, February). *Back to Basics: Radical Empathy as a Precursor for Culturally-Sustained Community-Building in Distance Learning*. Sponsored by Counselor Education Distance Learning Conference, Palo Alto, CA.

Patterson, A., Marimon, E. A., & **Medina, C., V.** (2020, April). *Critical perspectives in Higher Education*. Sponsored by the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

Patterson, A., Marimon, E. A., & **Medina, C., V.** (2019, November). *From advocacy in concept to advocacy in practice: A case study of a highly engaging undergraduate course*. Sponsored by the National Association for Multicultural Education, Tuscon, AZ.

Marimon, E. A., **Medina, C., V.**, & Shriver, R. (2018, October). *DC social justice fellowship*. Sponsored by Engagement Scholarship Consortium, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Medina, C., V., & Hinojosa, T. J. (2018, September). *Expanding the critical lens: Marginalized identities and online video gaming*. Sponsored by North Atlantic Region Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, Burlington, Vermont.

Medina, C., V. (2018, April). *Pair-a-dice: Using gaming as a therapeutic tool*. Sponsored by 8th Annual Chi Sigma Iota Pennsylvania Statewide Conference, West Chester, PA.

Medina, C., V., Hinojosa, T.J., & Mudge, S. (2017, October). *Using authentic mentorship to help CES doctoral students of color thrive*. Sponsored by the Association for Counseling Education and Supervision, Chicago, IL.

Hinojosa, T. J., **Medina, C., V.**, & DeVries, S. (2015, October). *Behind the label: A holistic approach to addressing lesbian client needs*. Sponsored by the European Branch of the American Counseling Association, Naples, Italy.