Introduction

I continue to be committed to the emergence of a post-postmodern critical framework that emphasizes the more flexible, kaleidoscopic thinking about human experience that computer-based narrative formats could help us achieve.
—Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*

Confessions of a Troublemaker

I’m here to make some trouble for gamers. You’d be right in thinking that they don’t really need any help from me on that score; gamers have been in trouble since games have been around. However, while games themselves have experienced a rehabilitation at the hands of many dedicated designers and academics seeking to rescue their formal qualities for the good that they could theoretically do in the world, gamers have been more disposable in our imaginations.

To be fair, the gamer has always been associated with trouble. In English, the term emerged in its earliest form as a name for gamblers and other unsavory characters. Examples from the Oxford English Dictionary are unequivocal, spanning centuries:

From 1450: “That who soevyr suffer eny dise-player, carder, tenys player, or other unliefull gamer, to use unliefull games in their house”

From 1654: “All you scoffers and scorners, & backbiters, and revilers, and extortioners, and whoremongers, & envious ones, & Gamers, and sporters . . . are all shut out from the true faith.”

From 1845: “The gamer is farther from restoration even than the drunkard, because what he does he does in the light of sobriety and reason.”
This is a long time to spend being the bad guy. 

_Gamer_ no longer shares such close association with gambling, but it remains mired in infamy nonetheless. Popular culture is full of representations of screen-addicted teenagers, grown men living in their mothers’ basements, and socially awkward outcasts.\(^1\) These benign, if undesirable, losers even enjoyed heroic status at one point as the “gamer boy genius[es]”\(^2\) whose particular talents for wrangling computers could save the world. As the community has become more mainstream, however, we’ve heard stories of twitchy ten-year-olds squealing hate speech in online multiplayer games, faceless masses sending death and rape threats on Twitter, and pranksters calling in SWAT teams half a continent away.\(^3\) In the wake of the 2016 United States presidential elections, gamers were said to be a core demographic (perhaps even the origin) of what media dubbed the “alt-right,” that cesspool of internet hatred that propelled an unqualified, unapologetic bigot to the head of state.\(^4\) The boyish charms on display in _WarGames_ (1983) and _TRON_ (1982) have been supplanted by the entitled rich kids, militant white supremacists, and abject waffle-dippers of _Gamer_ (2009). Worse than losers, we now see gamers as toxic. In the popular imagination, they are actively contributing to the deterioration of society through malice rather than passively through apathy and neglect. And they are still in trouble: with their parents, with their peers, and increasingly, with the law.\(^5\)

As a gamer myself, I wrote this book to grapple with the barrage of contradictions that has plagued my coming of age at the turn of the ludic century. I used to play on my uncles’ PC and Nintendo Entertainment System until my brother and I received our first console, a Super Nintendo, when I was ten. Being a gamer informed my childhood, my adolescence and, eventually, my professional career. Being a gamer even informed my sexual and gender identity. Video games allowed me to play around with (toxic, militarized) masculinity and the thrills of falling in love with women before I was ready to be queer in meatspace. They gave me a way to connect to my brother and other boys in the restricted gender landscape of my youth and, in my adulthood, to a vibrant community that uses technology and play to interrogate the very foundations of gender and normalcy.

Somewhere along the way, I also developed a strong sense of political accountability. My training as a graduate student in English and feminist
studies capped off a long adolescence of becoming aware of the structures of white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy that had been woven into the fabric of my reality since birth. A true geek, I knew this process as taking the red pill, from the transgender Wachowskis’ sci-fi epic The Matrix—and I’m more than a little pissed that angry misogynists on the internet have perverted the phrase to mean rejecting a fantasized hegemony of feminism. Gaming served as the background, and eventually the foreground, of my political development, which was fraught with contradictions between the utopian conditions that I desired for the world, the fantasies offered to me by mainstream entertainment media, and the actual limitations that I and those around me lived with every day. Eventually, I accepted the reality that one can never arrive, as game designer Porpentine describes it, at "A PERFECT FEMINISM AS SYNTHESIZED BY 1000 YEARS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ALGORITHMS."6 I am not the first to discover this, of course, but the gamer in me was shocked to find out that social justice is an endless grind, not a boss battle, and while the stakes are high, if I’m doing it right, I won’t be the one reaping most of the rewards—including the psychological self-soothing of a sacrificial hero. One does not become woke; one must stay woke. It’s a process without end.

Staying woke is particularly exhausting when you are also committed to pleasure, which is necessary to live a full life and ultimately the purpose of social justice activism: to provide full lives to those who are prevented from living them by cultural and institutional injustices. As a gamer, I recognize the frustration that other gamers feel when someone points out the ways that games contribute to inequality in society. I recognize the rage that comes from it—how it feels to want to avoid taking the red pill and retain as much easy pleasure for oneself as possible—and even the simple desire for simple desires, which deters us from engaging with complicated, difficult, and unpolished media.

Perhaps I’m a bit of a masochist, but my response to this emotional turmoi has been to run toward the trouble rather than away from it. This has informed my scholarly approach to studying games. While important work has been done to draw attention to the innovative games and designers that fall outside of the hegemonic games industry, I am interested, in this project, in meeting gamer trouble on the battlefield of big-budget mainstream games—AAA, as these are known in the
industry—where so many controversies rage about the identities of players, of avatars, and of game developers themselves. This approach has its limitations, including the danger that paying more attention to problematic games simply reinforces our status quo. For me, that danger also comes with the promise that understanding the draw and power of the popular will help us cast its energies in more liberating directions, by either directly appealing to creators or indirectly complicating the desires of players.

Fans have been doing this kind of negotiation with popular culture for decades. I approach this work as a fan and a critic of video games but also as an academic who has the privilege of getting a paycheck to use my time to think and write about these problems at length. This means that my responses are less timely than fan and journalist criticism but also that they are well seasoned and, ideally, rooted in a tradition of intellectual work that can add additional flavors to our conversations. Many academics write about AAA games even while harboring a deep fear that they are not worth writing about at all, either because coming to their defense looks very bad and is probably bad for society or because the bad things about them are such low-hanging fruit for critique that it is difficult to sustain a nuanced conversation about them. As a result, we have a lot of theoretical work that avoids engaging with games that most people play, a lot of critical work that glosses over the politics of representation, a lot of descriptive work that looks over but not into the structures of racism and sexism in gaming culture and the industry, and a lot of hit pieces that resonate with our academic and politically minded peers. However, these never quite square with the phenomenological experience many of us have while playing a racist, sexist, homophobic, violent game.

_Gamer Trouble_ seeks out uncomfortable and turbulent places in popular gaming culture and dives into them, excavating the technological and ludic processes that underwrite, reinforce, and contradict what’s happening outside of the game console. Sometimes the turbulence isn’t visible at first glance. This book puts surface into conversation with depth in an attempt to come to a more productive relationship with the problems that gamers face today. For me, gamer trouble extends beyond an unsavory reputation. It encompasses the constrained dances we perform with our technologies in our struggles for avatar identification and
ludic conquest, the truly disgusting behaviors enacted in the name of enjoying a treasured pastime, and the very serious reminders from within the community that its exclusionary practices cannot last for much longer. But trouble is also a verb, and this book also works to trouble the ways we think about gamers, the ways we write about them, and the ways we ask them to change. And for those gamers willing to take on the challenge, I hope to trouble the way we think about our own relationships to technology, games, narratives, and each other.

Throughout this journey through gaming, I also search for ways to channel the gamer’s love for trouble (a love that I happen to share) into a love for grappling with contemporary political problems. I am a mixed-race, queer, feminist gamer, but I’m not trying to solve the Problem of Representation in gaming. No one can do that. What I am trying to do is explode that problem into lots of new problems, to deepen our engagement with those things we’re tempted to reject outright, and even to ruffle the feathers of some influential and beloved colleagues. And I’m doing it in the name of queer (and) women of color feminism and as a social justice warrior seeking change in the world.

Gamer Trouble at the Turn of the Ludic Century

The study of video games as an important cultural form has been on the rise for decades. By now, there are numerous academic journals, major conferences, and published monographs dedicated to the topic. Game studies classes are regular features in universities across the world, even in some of the older and seemingly more traditional places (like my own institution, Georgetown University). Game studies crosses disciplines, from computer science to English to music to psychology. And where academics aren’t yet studying games, they’re definitely trying to make them.

Most books like this one justify the study of games in terms of numbers: games make a lot of money—more than cinema, depending on who you ask—and a lot of people play them. In 2018, the Entertainment Software Association reported that sales of gaming hardware and software reached $36 billion, an 18 percent increase over the previous year, and, in 2019, that in the United States, 65 percent of homes included “someone who plays video games regularly.” Beyond statistics, we can
recognize the diffusion of gaming throughout popular culture in other ways—perhaps most strikingly when journalists identified gamers as the origin of the election-hijacking alt-right movement in 2016. The content exchange between the games industry and Hollywood has become bidirectional, with robust film franchises like Tomb Raider, Mortal Kombat, and Resident Evil and one-offs like Doom (2005), Rampage (2018), and Silent Hill (2006) taking inspiration from digital originals. Other films like TRON and Gamer explore the imaginative possibilities presented by our multimedia, interactive, networked entertainment systems. In mediums from novels to music, video games loom large in the cultural landscape—as they have for decades.

On a more abstract level, there are also those who believe we have entered a cultural moment defined by the affects and actions of gaming. In one of the earliest academic studies on video games, Patricia Marks Greenfield advocated for the use of video games and other electronic media in classrooms to facilitate necessary cognitive training for future generations, including the ability to understand complex systems. For Jane McGonigal, games can fundamentally reshape the way we live and work and unlock our potential for increased productivity and happiness—an epic win for the individual and society. In “Manifesto for a Ludic Century,” Eric Zimmerman argues that while games have been a part of human culture for much of history, computers, as well as the information manipulation that they enable, have facilitated their rise to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century. He also claims the reverse—“computers didn’t create games; games created computers”—gesturing toward how analog games and digital media share structural similarities as well as the fact that game development frequently drives computer development. This paradoxical entanglement ultimately leads him to the conclusion that, in a world directed by dynamic technological systems interacting with one another, the way to get ahead is to think in terms of games. These perspectives tap into the structures of gaming rather than their surface representations. They point toward how games uniquely capture and encourage behaviors that are important for life in the twenty-first century, whether it is learning how to intuit the complicated patterns of interlocking systems or how to motivate ourselves into maximum productivity.
If this all sounds too optimistic for your tastes, there are also plenty of folks who are worried about what it means to live in a ludic century. Their concerns go beyond violence and problematic representational practices to interrogate how games prime us for a life of constant competition and work. Janet Murray, for example, declared that games like Tetris perfectly capture “the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught.”\textsuperscript{14} Christopher Paul argues that the meritocratic structures of gaming reinforce the hierarchies that uphold white supremacy and toxic masculinity.\textsuperscript{15} According to Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, “Video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire,” crucial for the continuation of the current political order: “a school for labor, an instrument of rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced techno-capital.”\textsuperscript{16} Media theorists have made similar claims about other forms like television and film, and rather than take that as a refutation of any such type of argument, I would like to embrace all the research on the topic as an indication that media does, in fact, both reflect and reinforce the politics of our time in ways that go beyond the representation of certain types of characters and stories. And games, as we have already discussed, occupy a significant portion of our contemporary media landscape. Whether they are central to our understanding of the twenty-first-century condition or merely an ancillary component of a much larger political economy, games are increasingly important to the way we make meaning: as integral parts of the economy, as activities that put us in intimate relationships with machines and others and that force us to reverse-engineer complicated systems for the purpose of mastery; and as influential storytelling platforms that can help us imagine new ways of living.

If the twenty-first century is a game, then it follows that we are its players. The gamer, in addition to being the problem child of contemporary culture, is a useful metaphor for understanding our relationship to media, technology, and politics. I am reaching for the figure of the gamer (separate from games and gaming) for inspiration in understanding the world, though I am not the first to do so. McKenzie Wark constructs another metaphor of the gamer, as the individual navigating
our nightmare capitalist simulacrum. In her *Gamer Theory*, ideology is “gamespace,” and it “wants us to believe we are all nothing but gamers now, competing not against enemies of class or faith or nation but only against other gamers.”

This is the space of late capitalism and the military-entertainment complex, in which the individual’s desire for potency and advancement is the key operating principle for maintaining a sense of alienation from other workers. I hold Wark’s deployment of the term *gamer* very close to the center of this project and wish to explore the ways that games and gamers are key components of our current neoliberal order.

Throughout this book, I invoke the notion of the gamer to think about those who play video games. In doing so, I am in conversation with researchers like Adrienne Shaw, who argues that the continued attempts to reclaim and diversify the term in critical theory and activist writing reify a figure with which many players do not identify and encourage us to engage in a neoliberal politics of diversity that places importance on spending power and marketing for the purposes of recognition.

Leigh Alexander makes a similar point when she declares that gamers are “over,” gesturing toward the cycle of toxicity that likely generated the exodus in the first place: “‘Gamer’ isn’t just a dated demographic label that most people increasingly prefer not to use. Gamers are over. That’s why they’re so mad.” I do not disagree with these critics, particularly as they seek to deconstruct the identity as one that has been leveraged to consolidate power and influence in the hands of a few while reinforcing a consumerist logic of diversity. Indeed, the limitations of diversity politics as they circulate through individual games, critical theory, and industry practices are at the core of this book.

My interest in the gamer has less to do with actual demographics (or, in fact, actual gamers, in the sense of those who explicitly claim the identity) and more to do with the theoretical implications of the idea of a gamer as an individual traversing complicated technological, narrative, ludic, economic, and social systems simultaneously and at will. To grapple with the idea of the gamer is also to grapple with the question of how a marketing fiction is deployed in the interest of organizing differences among an otherwise unaffiliated group of people. All identities, after all, are fictions that organize us. I am in agreement with Sara Ahmed on this score, who argues that regardless of the ontological reality of an identity
category, the task of the critic is to “attend to categories to understand how what is ungrounded can become a social ground.”

No discourse, of course, has rendered “gamer” an identity category in the way that sex, gender, race, or sexuality have been, but the residual effects on the community look strikingly similar. Take, for example, the Entertainment Consumers Association, founded “to give gamers a collective voice with which to communicate their concerns, address their issues and focus their advocacy efforts,” including staging protests at court hearings and circulating petitions. Other organizations, such as charities like Child’s Play, seek explicitly to raise the profile and reputation of the gamer community by doing good deeds. These movements and groups emerged at a time when video games were surging forward as an entertainment industry, with all the anxieties about children and sex and violence that attend such a rise in influence. Just like films and comic books and novels before them, video games have been subject to moral panics about sex and violence and threatened with government regulation. The strain on “gamer” as an identitarian designation also emerges, unsurprisingly, alongside these controversies. It is easy to pick out how the logic of authenticity, a central feature of identity politics, structures how movements like #GamerGate mobilize their constituents. “Real” gamers, after all, would not ruin the fun by nitpicking minor details of a game or support news organizations that are out to trick them into playing terribly crafted but ideologically innovative games. Responses to harassment also engage this identitarian logic, calling for increased visibility and inclusion of nontraditional gamers within corporate structures and design paradigms, reinforcing rather than breaking cycles of incorporation into unjust systems.

Gamers, for better and for worse, are bigger than those who actually play video games. In many ways, gamers are bigger than video games themselves. We gamers have come to overshadow the complicated assemblage of community, technology, art, money, and play that we call gaming, and I hope to attend to this condition by troubling the gamer’s position with respect to the other parts of the system. Identity is an important marker for imbalances of power and a crucial site of resistance, but an overdetermined focus on identity itself can also mask the operations that sustain that imbalance. In this moment, gamers are exceptional: in our virtuosity as players and our toxicity as fans, in our lack
of diversity (or abundance thereof) and our exploitability as a market category, and in our mastery over our own virtual worlds and heroic narratives. In part, this book aims to knock us down a peg, to put us into our proper context: stuck inside the mess of stories, rules, machines, conflicts, desires, affordances, constraints, and politics with which we continually struggle to actualize ourselves. The overdetermined emphasis on gamers can lead to the assumption that human subjectivity—that fetishized essence of gameplay that gamers and critics alike call “agency” or “interactivity”—is the most important component of the gamic system.

The declaration that video games are “a mess we don’t need to keep trying to clean up” comes from an ontological position similarly interested in decentering human figures from an analysis of games. Such thinking, whether explicitly in the form of object-oriented ontology or based in related intellectual traditions like platform studies, has been an important part of the development of game studies as a discipline. The image of the mess in particular offers a way for us to embrace the proliferation of approaches to studying games without attempting to constrict them to a narrow range of best practices. It also aptly metaphorizes the complicated assemblage of parts that make up the system of gaming.

And yet, while I am working within and expanding upon a tradition of game studies that looks beyond the human and holds multiple methodologies in tension with one another, I do not embark on this project with the mess primarily in mind.

The “trouble” of gamer trouble is in part a commitment to my own training and intellectual genealogy, which has pushed me to entangle games and gamers with the frequently maligned discourses of identity knowledges like feminism and ethnic studies. These methodologies may begin with the very questions of inclusion and identification that animate so many gamer conflicts, but then they push into them to locate structural social justice interventions. I prefer the word trouble to mess for the way it can describe not merely ontology and thingness, but the frictional relationships between things (and people), as Donna Haraway uses it in urging us to find new ways to live and create—perhaps even survive—together, across species and in damaged ecologies. It is a word made most famous in academic writing by Judith Butler, who uses it to think through the ways we all produce gender by performing in
concert and in conflict with social norms and our own bodies, and how such performances and subversions open up new political possibilities. Gamers perform such complicated dances with social and technological systems each time they pick up a controller. It is also alive in political discourse, such as in US Representative John Lewis’s common refrain to “make good trouble” when seeking racial justice. Trouble describes resistance and consequence, anarchy and solidarity. It is something we find ourselves in as much as we create it for ourselves, and it is frequently unclear whether we find it pleasant or not.

Trouble also invokes, for me, the deep histories of conflict around intersectionality in feminist and queer theories, particularly on the part of Black women intellectuals, from Sojourner Truth and Audre Lorde to Kimberlé Crenshaw and beyond. These voices are still calling for the recognition of difference—a refusal to flatten ontologies while striving to flatten hierarchies—while being blamed for divisions within their own political movements. They are the original killjoys, facing backlash from their contemporaries for the crime of wanting both recognition and the redistribution of resources. Feminist thought has never been monolithic, and I deploy it in this book in ways that are primarily concerned with racial, transgender, and queer justice. Trouble is a glitch in the matrix. Trouble is a woman who stands out. Trouble is *cruzaando la frontera*.

*Gamer trouble* encompasses all of these registers because gamers are and do all of these things. Similar to the mess, *trouble* describes the multifaceted condition of video games as software, hardware, story, performance, and more. It layers on their participation in relationships fraught with instability and conflict, including within the political realm, where they have gathered so much attention recently, and in the academic realm, where they have risen to prominence over the past few decades. It incorporates the gamer’s simultaneous experiences of immersion within and alienation from virtual worlds and virtual characters, their struggles with technological and ludological systems in the act of play, as well as their various efforts to make sense of and embrace all of this. And above all, *trouble* places games and gamers squarely in conversation with its own critical foundations in queer and women of color feminisms. In the multiplicity of approaches to the study of games, this is not an uncontroversial move, as it risks the usual association of identity politics and identity knowledges with a lack of critical rigor. However, in the spirit of
the mess and the trouble into which we’ve waded, I humbly suggest that if there is room to work toward correcting the lack of sufficient attention to technical details in the study of video games, there is also room to continue to explore the possibilities of queer, feminist, and critical race perspectives in our field as well—especially those perspectives that show us how identity politics actually lie at the heart of our technologies. This book adds to the conversation started decades ago by researchers like Patricia Marks Greenfield and Marsha Kinder and works with contemporary feminist game studies thinkers aiming to realize our “Laura Mulvey moment” in our field. 

Judith Butler set out to critique the identity category “woman” as an organizing principle around which feminist politics revolved, famously arguing that both sex and gender are continuously produced through individual and systemic performances. In Gamer Trouble, I demonstrate how the act of playing a video game creates similarly troubled circuits of performance and identity formation, some of which rely on the emergence of a coherent category, “gamer,” against which critics and other outliers may be judged.

These performances also continually destabilize the identity category, such that it is always in flux. There are the gamer troubles that serve as a cultural backdrop to video games and the gamer’s trouble of constantly negotiating agency and constraint within technological and narrative systems. There is the trouble of industry representation, which sometimes seems stuck in adolescent fantasies when designing stories and characters. Then there is the trouble of game studies itself, which emerged scant decades ago and is currently enjoying a surge in popularity, with all the anxiety and growing pains that go along with it.

This is the final rhetorical beauty of the word trouble: it contains multitudes. All of these troubles, while inhabiting their own distinct conditions of possibility and their own unique ontologies, nevertheless coalesce around the central turbulence that animates gaming and gamer culture: playing a video game. It is to this trouble that we now turn.

Gamer, Interrupted

Gamer trouble emerges in a lot of different contexts, but I’d like to kick off this journey by locating it within the affective and attentional
structures of gaming itself, which envelope users within circuits of play that are most pleasurable when uninterrupted. These structures operate at the immediate, face-to-interface level as well as on the level of culture, and attending to the way that they organize gamers can help us gain a foothold to understand how power flows through individuals and communities in the gamic system.

It is fairly common to think of gamers as immersed in their own worlds, virtual or otherwise. This plays out in our popular notions of what gamers are as well as in how we have theorized the medium in game studies. Throughout much of the field’s short history, this reality was frequently described as the “magic circle,” a space in which the rules of a game supplant the rules of society, creating a zone of play that allows a range of behaviors and interactions that would otherwise not occur among players. Drawn from Johann Huizinga’s foundational work on play, the concept of the magic circle became popularized in Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman’s *Rules of Play* game design manual. It captured the attention of a number of scholars and produced enough challenges and misreadings that Zimmerman wrote a formal response in 2012 to knock down what he called the straw-man argument that the magic circle proposed games as closed formal systems separated from their cultural contexts.31

And yet, conceptualizing the magic circle is not the only way that players and theorists have imagined themselves as part of an enclosed, if permeable, system. One of the reasons the magic circle is a useful way to describe gameplay, after all, is that it offers a convenient account for the sense of separation one feels from the “real world” during gameplay. Despite the formal problematics, for analysis, of restricting game activity to a privileged, separate arena (and there are many, and they are well documented), to say that the relationship between player and game, or players and each other, is experienced at a distance from the world should not be controversial.

We can see a similar attempt to capture this distancing in the concepts of flow and immersion, which emerge in part to describe affective experiences of gameplay. *Flow* is a state of absorption resulting from performing an activity that is difficult enough to challenge one’s abilities but not so difficult as to frustrate them. Though it was developed by behavioral psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to understand
self-motivation to perform a broad range of tasks, it has become important in the study and design of games as well. *Immersion* is related to flow in its attention-consuming capacities but frequently is understood in relation to fictional worlds, as Janet Murray outlines in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Murray likens it to being plunged into a body of water, whose difference from the air “takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus.”

These phenomena fit into what James Ash prefers to call an “interface envelope,” a structure “in which space and time appear and are orientated around the immediacy of player action.” The interface envelope captures the tendency of an interface to shepherd a user’s attention and entangle them within its own circuits of power, continuously adjusting and folding itself around them to create shifting, extended modes of engagement. For Ash, envelope power results when a developer successfully enfolds players within their systems, but its responsive and temporary nature means that the envelope is not always achieved nor does it always look the same from player to player. Because of its ability to imagine envelopment in terms of flexible power exchanges between gamer, game, and technology, I find this formulation particularly useful for a feminist analysis of gaming, and I will continue to draw on it as a way to understand various forms of gamer trouble.

When we expand the enclosure beyond the game itself, we get what critics have called the *metagame*, explained by Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux as the envelope of practices that exist around video games, “the material trace of the discontinuity between the phenomenal experience of play and the mechanics of digital games.” The metagame is what bridges the game to the real-world power and politics that swirl around it. Paying attention to metagames can reveal ideological structures at work in gamer culture, such as the hegemonic “anti-metagaming metagame” that cuts video games out of their context, reducing games to opaque commodities with defined uses, and turns gamers into entities plugged seamlessly into these products, according to the will of the corporations who create them. What flows from this metagame is a techno-utopian ideology that encourages the belief in meritocracy, forward progress, and the enclosed magic circle—envelope power on a meta level.

Whether we consider gamers to exist within bubbles, envelopes, circuits, circles, or other semiclosed systems, the enclosure within such
attention-commanding and gratification-granting power dynamics, no matter how permeable, presents the question of what trouble happens when these spaces experience a rupture. Boluk and LeMieux explain organized online harassment campaigns like #GamerGate as a result of breaking the magic circle surrounding gamer culture, disrupting a metagame that directs gamers to pursue seamless enjoyment. A rupture in the envelope becomes akin to the castle walls under siege. Gamers react in the way they have been trained: by neutralizing the enemy. In many ways, conflict is central to gaming, and therefore it must be central to how we understand gamers. However, the desire to obliterate opponents occasionally seems at odds with the pursuit of gamic tension: Does one want to win or to play?

To understand this paradox, we must dig deeper into the nature of conflict in establishing envelope power in games. We can point to a number of critics who recognize the importance of friction to gaming. In their survey of definitions by game designers and theorists from the past century, Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman found that rules limiting player behaviors were ubiquitous across all but one of the eight definitions that they examined, even though “conflict or contest” was only explicitly included in three of the definitions. Rules, in their function as unnecessary obstacles that structure compelling moments of play, are fundamentally about constraint. Even before this, there is the question of technology itself. Whether the ultimate foe is an elaborate artificial intelligence or a simple maze, mastering the interface is the first step in the journey. We fight with controllers, with simulated physics, with monitor refresh rates, and with network lag before we ever fight with game rules or each other. It is no coincidence that in their roles as cinematic heroes, gamers frequently represent the victory of man over machine.

Master the interface to master the rules to master your opponent: this is the gamer’s way (at least as the current ideology of gaming constructs it), and it is decorated with epic wins, achievements, unlockables, and Easter eggs. This is the gamer that Wark invokes when she proposes gamer theory, at the heart of which is gamer radicalization, a breaking free of the ideology of constant competition and personal advancement: “The gamer as theorist might look toward a transformation of what matters within gamespace, a style of play that edges away from agon, distinction, decision, the fatal either/or.” Of course, there are already gamers
who play against this ideology of winning in various ways. However, I do not invoke Wark here merely to repeat her call for expanded notions of playing games. I invoke her to point out the inherent contradiction in a gamer ideology that seeks out conflict only to abolish it by winning. Games are full of competition, antagonism, aggression, and friction by design. Without unnecessary obstacles, there are no games.

We might consider, then, that at the heart of many gamer troubles lies ruptures that introduce the wrong kind of obstacles—those obstacles that stand in the way of the successful implementation of the envelope power (or perhaps, more accurately, the power envelope) of gameplay, disrupting the envelope's integrity. These include conflicts between player and avatar identity, guilt-inducing critiques, uncanny animations, and network lag. The proliferation of theories of containment in game studies suggests that envelopment is part of the pleasure of gaming, so conflict is tolerated only to the extent that it sustains the envelope (which, crucially, is initiated by a technical apparatus). This is Bernard Suits’s lusory attitude, the willing acceptance of constraint for the sake of the game, gone digital. Gamers fit into this scheme according to how well they do or do not maintain the envelope: in game studies, we know the wrong kind of players as triflers, cheats, and spoilsports. However, in the context of the digital, envelopment also involves the technological mediation of interpersonal connection, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the platform. These (dis)connections cannot be messy, or the interface has failed. The power envelope, even in team play, is one that still tends, ontologically, toward isolation and enclosure.

This mingling of affect and power is useful for queer women of color feminist analysis, because bad feelings expose precisely when and where the disruption of power occurs. This is true for gamers that fit into the demographic fiction of the straight white adolescent boy as well as those that fall outside of it. Envelopes are never absolute, and trouble gets to everyone eventually. While they may have a similar experience of ruptures in the gaming envelope, it is important to recognize that different gamers have different proclivities toward and capacities for responding. For individuals who continuously navigate structures that erase their visibility in the world, certain types of trouble, like a protagonist avatar who does not match the player’s own identity, are not particularly disruptive. Other types, like coordinated harassment campaigns,
increase their vulnerability in a wider context of everyday oppression. For those who move more effortlessly through the world thanks to various forms of privilege, the disruption of a potent power fantasy can be more unsettling.

This book focuses on different kinds of tensions that build across the gamic system as power flows through its different parts, drawing in and repelling different gamers at different times. We may locate a specific tension in a specific place, such as a controller or an interaction between players, but its embeddedness within the wider context of the game’s power envelope means that the origins and the consequences of any particular trouble is directly tied to the rest of the system. In order to fully understand the nature of gamer trouble, we must move fluidly between the singular and connected forms of trouble that gaming presents. From the microcosmic levels of electricity and flicks of the thumb to the grand stages of identity politics and global capitalism, wherever gamers find themselves, gamer trouble follows.

Exploring Gamer Trouble

Now we arrive at the roadmap of the book, which brings the question of the field of game studies into immediate view. What we now know as game studies has seen its share of turmoil as it sought to find a place across and apart from various disciplines, from computer science to sociology to literature. While a full accounting of field formation is outside of the scope of this project, a brief characterization might explain why politicized inquiry and the widespread valuation of identity knowledges with respect to game studies only rose to prominence in recent years. This illusion is connected to what might be the only bit of lore that exists about the formation of the field: the narratology versus ludology debates. Much like #GamerGate, narratology versus ludology is described quite differently based on which side one feels an affinity toward. On the one hand, Janet Murray describes it as an “academic turf war”43 in which so-called ludologists sought to carve out territory for the study of games as systems by labeling other critics “narratologists” who only seek to understand games as stories. On the other hand, Espen Aarseth describes the ludologist intervention as “a reaction to sloppy scholarship” unfairly characterized as a ban on narrative approaches to
games by those who “are less astute readers, scholars and interpreters than their training gives them occasion to presume.”

I am here more interested in the affective consequences of narratology versus ludology than the particulars of the conflict (which are subject to analysis elsewhere in this book) because this scholarly kerfuffle has had profound effects on those beginning their training in game studies, although we have only been able to discuss this in informal support networks. Feminist scholar Emma Vossen has detailed the repercussions of the lingering debate on women and nonbinary graduate students working in the field, noting the gendered timbre of the argument (emotional, “sloppy” narratologists vs. rational, precise ludologists) and offering her own experience as someone who delayed her entrance into the field for a long time because of its perceived hostility toward the perspectives of women. Elise Vist recounts her decision to exit game studies as a graduate student because her feminist perspectives felt like a secondary concern in larger disciplinary conversations. Women and feminists are familiar with these slippages between identity and politics (woman vs. feminist), either of which may mark us for exclusion from particular communities. I have my own experiences to add to these anecdotes, but what I will put in print is that I am grateful for time spent as a graduate student studying English and feminist studies, without which I would not have the confidence to approach video games as an unrepentant queer feminist scholar pursuing racial justice.

Vossen attributes the exclusionary nature of game studies to the intersection of academic culture with gamer culture, both of which are dominated, at least in our imaginations, by straight white men. Crucially, representatives on both sides of the narratology versus ludology debate understood what was happening as a kind of competition, whether the “turf wars” of Murray’s characterization or the invasion implied by Aarseth’s earlier declaration that cinema and literary study were attempting to colonize video games. This conflict may itself be a lingering effect of academic training, described variously as an “anxiety of influence” inducing ludologists to cast off their former disciplines or a symptom of “the critical sensibility that dominated the ’90s—the era of deconstruction and poststructuralism in which many game studies scholars came of age.” However, the pugilism of this era, which has been parodied in a Photoshopped image of scholars Janet Murray and Gonzalo Frasca
facing off in a boxing match, also hints at the gamers lurking beneath the surface. It's true that all academic production involves a bit of argument, but it would be a mistake not to point out the similarities, both affective and structural, between winning a game and winning an argument—or winning a game and scoring a tenure-track job, a big federal grant, or resources to build a department. In other words, gamer trouble extends to game studies because game studies (indeed, academia) is full of gamers: not just players, not just critics, but individuals whose enjoyment of games as objects and attachments to the intense attention-commanding structures of playing (and winning) align too easily with the competitive demands of the neoliberal academy.

The spoils of such victories come in the form of citation practices, which form what Sara Ahmed calls the “academic walls” structuring our disciplines. Ludologists seemed to have won the battle, as the first two decades of game studies scholarship was dominated by formalist perspectives that not only shied away from cultural critique of video games, either about gender or race, but also minimized the impact of women on the field. The feminist practitioners in game studies have taken note and demanded that we, as a discipline, do better. Kishonna Gray created a hashtag, #CiteHerWork, to point out how the citational politics of journalists and academics writing about games tends to erase the contributions of women. Mia Consalvo asked game studies to take up the work of confronting toxic gamer masculinity, and TreaAndrea Russworm put out a call to action for game studies to join the fight against white supremacy. In order to answer these calls, we must rethink our histories, our citation practices, and our scholarly interests: “It takes a conscious willed—dare I say nontrivial?—effort not to reproduce an inheritance.”

Today, we appear to be in a renaissance of queer, feminist, and critical race scholarship in game studies, with numerous book collections, journal special issues, and monographs rising to prominence over the past few years—a fulfillment, perhaps, of our Laura Mulvey moment. The appearance of this resurgence is an illusion, of course, as critics have been writing about gender, race, and sexuality in games for decades even if this work hasn’t been circulated as widely. In 2017, Adrienne Shaw exhorted scholars in game studies to recognize the rich history of intersectional feminist scholarship that had been written about games since
the 1980s but that faded into near-obscurity in the aftermath of narrativology versus ludology. If I make the mistake of calling this current trend a wave, it is only to draw attention to the fact that, as Clare Hemmings points out, such narrativizations of our disciplines can obscure the rich work that has always been going on. That we can point toward no explicit prohibition of feminist work in video games prior to this wave does not disprove an exclusion; Ahmed notes that being the “diverse” body in a discipline tunes one in to not only how “the apparently open spaces of academic gatherings are restricted” but also the ways that “those restrictions are either kept out of view or defended if they come into view.” The inchoate discomfort of graduate students and early career scholars that seem to mark an exclusion of women, queers, and people of color (or those critical perspectives that advocate for them) in game studies are probably not symptoms of hysteria, even if we cannot prove their origins without harm to ourselves or our communities.

I began working on this project long before #GamerGate, during a time in which robust intersectional, interdisciplinary feminist critique of video games had been driven under the radar by the remnants of a scholarly debate that pushed the major players in the discipline toward a critique of form and structure rather than culture and representation. Many of us worked in seeming isolation or within small supportive communities to develop approaches to studying games that met the demands of ludology while remaining compatible with the political exigencies of the various identity knowledges in which we were being trained. During a period marked in the United States by the presidency of Barack Obama, popular interest in feminism, queer liberation, and racial justice surged forward, propelled in part by communities on the internet that facilitated the spread of information about activism and politics to larger and larger audiences. While identity knowledges remained strong within their own corners of the academy, increasingly visible clashes between progressive and reactionary activists online and elsewhere pushed an interest in identity into the mainstream of academia and eventually game studies itself. #GamerGate, only the most visible of these encounters, represented a tipping point beyond which no one associated with video games—academics, fans, and industry alike—could afford not to have an opinion about identity and representation in video games. While this was a boon for visibility, #GamerGate
also set the terms for conversations that many of us had been building for years. It is not lost on the feminist gaming and game studies communities that our relevance is now justified by the emergence of a virulent harassment campaign rather than the self-evident value of nuanced conversations about the politics of gamers and video games. The landscape has been irrevocably altered, but the work remains the same.

*Gamer Trouble* enacts a model of interrogating difference in video games that unites the study of hardware with that of community and considers software design alongside representation in the traditions of the digital humanities and game studies alike. At the same time, it also maintains a focus on exposing both the toxic politics and liberatory potentials of games and gaming culture with the theoretical frames of feminist, queer, and critical race studies. Of particular note, throughout the book I use the singular *they* rather than the conventional *he* or feminist *she* as the default indefinite pronoun in an attempt to subvert our binary gender system. In the event that binary gender is necessary for discussion, I restrict my use of *male* and *female* to discussions that engage with popularly held (mis)conceptions about the biological body, to key theoretical terminology (such as “male gaze”), and to labels as they are used in computer interfaces. My use of *women* and *men* (or *feminine* and *masculine*) throughout this book may thus result in a few awkward formulations, but this is a sacrifice that I am willing to make.

To build this analytical approach, each chapter of *Gamer Trouble* moves through layers of the gamic system—discourse, technology, and representation, in turn—before finally settling on a chapter that tackles a single game series from a system-wide point of view. Each of these layers, of course, blends into the others. Separating them in this way is less to imply any ideological breaks than to give each component of the system sustained critical attention in turn.

Chapter 1, “Of Dickwolves and Killjoys: Feminism and Interpretative Violence in Gaming Communities,” traces a long history of conflict in gamer culture that contextualizes the vitriol of #GamerGate as ordinary rather than extraordinary gamer trouble. While the character of the hashtag harassment campaign might have come as a surprise to those who were discovering gamer culture through the reports of the mainstream media, it was all too familiar to the women, queers, and people of color whose opinions and bodies have long caused the wrong kind of
friction in gaming communities. Of particular interest here is the Dick-wolves controversy of 2010, which sprung up when feminist gamers pushed back against the popular gaming webcomic *Penny Arcade* for a casual rape joke. Earlier moments of harassment in gaming communities can help us understand these clashes in terms of worldbuilding and knowledge creation, in which explosive rhetoric surrounding controversial nodes in the gaming community exposes the centrality of appropriate interpretation, rather than identity per se, as a core component of discursive border wars.

Rather than remain fixated on the sins of gamers behaving badly, I extend this analysis of discourse into early academic writing about video games. This era of game studies field-building drew heavily on the language of colonization in order to position video games writ large as the victim of exploitation by an academic elite housed within established disciplines as well as the target of smear campaigns by overzealous cultural critics instigating moral panics about sex and violence. In order to make room for real experts to provide useful commentary, both of the offending groups—greedy English professors and fanatical feminists—needed to be exposed as ignorant of the forms and functions of video games.Analyzing early scholarship around *Grand Theft Auto* reveals many of the same anxieties about appropriate interpretation that motivated the vitriol of gamer purists, which, coincidentally, also placed feminists on the outside of a group that “really” knew what games were and how they work.

Chapter 2, “Making a Face: Quantizing Reality in Character Animation and Customization,” examines how science and software design reflect cultural understandings of race and gender. This chapter reaches back to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revitalization of physiognomy to understand how contemporary technologies reinscribe old stereotypes and approaches to race and gender that have been repeated and critiqued for centuries. The positivist perspectives on humanity that developed during this time continue to reverberate in contemporary approaches to gender, race, and sexuality, particularly in the realm of computer animation and modeling, which is particularly susceptible to scientific discourses about reality and requires numbers to perform its operations. I invoke the notion of quantization, or the chunking up of a thing like the human face into discrete numbers, in order to explore the
ways that the numerical fictions about bodies overwrite the complexity of actual identity.

I explore, on the one hand, machines and the bodies they capture for digital reproduction and, on the other, gamers and avatar creation interfaces that create bodies in the digital, showing that the interactions between them enact what Gloria Anzaldúa identifies as the practice of *haciendo caras*: strategically navigating systems of racial oppression by leveraging the friction between a mask placed by society and one's own face. Rather than complaining about mere diversity and inclusion, gamers who point toward avatar creators that limit their ability to create a range of representation are pointing toward a type of wrinkle in the power envelope that is less disruptive to those gamers who are more frequently (or more thoroughly) hailed by the system.

Chapter 3, “Gender, Power, and the Gamic Gaze: Re-viewing Portal and Bayonetta,” takes a gamer’s perspective on classic feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, which features prominently in conversations about sexy women in video games. This chapter challenges gamers and game studies scholars to think about the unique context of visuality in video games and what it means for the way we understand gendered power dynamics in visual scenes. The gaze operates differently in a medium that includes user-controlled cameras and multiple objects competing for attention in a saturated visual field, and we need to modulate our understanding of cameras accordingly.

At the center of the dispute over visuality in games lie the bodies of women that are frequently understood to be created by and for the pleasure of men. In order to explore new ways to think about visual power, this chapter interrogates Chell, the avatar from Portal who was widely celebrated as a landmark in the representation of women because of her modest figure and full-coverage jumpsuit, and the title character of Bayonetta, who was controversial because of her sexy aesthetic and over-the-top innuendo. In these cases, appearances are deceiving: considered within a more complete context of gameplay, computational procedures, and racial and queer histories, Chell and Bayonetta offer very different political possibilities than what simple representational analysis suggests. This chapter argues for the need to update our perspectives on media, identity, and power to account for a changing technological landscape.
Chapter 4, “Does Anyone Really Identify with FemShep? Troubling Identity (and) Politics in *Mass Effect*,” looks at the feminine version of Commander Shepard, known affectionately as FemShep to her fans, not as a character in her own right but as a structure full of holes into which gamers project their differences. I propose that shifting away from FemShep as a character allows us to see beyond the ways in which she manifestly fails as a feminist and queer icon, from her technological status as a woman built on the framework of a man to the universally disappointing narrative that failed to maintain thematic consistency or pass many basic tests for avid social justice warriors.

Instead, the chapter attempts to rescue difference (which, in video games, becomes tamed into a series of menu choices designed to maximize market share) from neoliberal diversity politics. By inhabiting the contradictions that FemShep contains, FemShep fans point the way toward a coalitional politics that does not require shared identification for coherence. This invokes Audre Lorde’s concept of the “house of difference,” which Kara Keeling uses to think through digital identity politics and the value of becoming another. In turn, I build off of the work of these Black queer feminist thinkers to propose that while video game politics are frequently appropriative and imperfect, we must continue to work through uncertain territory in order to continue to grow.

The book concludes with a meditation on what it means to call for more conflict in an era dominated by vitriolic social media exchanges and violent rhetoric in political discourse, as well as how understanding trouble through the figure of the gamer can lead us to a more productive vision of frictional encounters. Trouble is about connections and mingling rather than isolation, and in many respects, it is about resisting victory and conquest, even of our own sides, as a political necessity. It is sometimes damaging and frequently uncomfortable, but it is also often the only way to respond to systems of power that will never stop shifting under our feet.

Through its varied, messy explorations of video games, gamer culture, and queer (and) women of color feminist theory, *Gamer Trouble* attempts the “flexible, kaleidoscopic thinking” that Janet Murray envisions for the future of a media studies defined by computers. This commitment to complexity also enacts very political goals. Trouble does not have to be destructive. As the chapters of this book and a long history of feminist,
queer, and racial justice struggles demonstrate, it can be tremendously
generative and even necessary for development. Yet while most activ-
ists and oppressed communities engage in conflict because they have no
other choice, gamers intentionally tap into trouble—frequently, though
not always, for fun. Gamers are paradigmatic for helping us think about
the possibilities of enrichment and empowerment in incredibly conten-
tious times. We must learn how to embrace the ruptures and breakages
in these attention cycles and turn them into generative forces rather
than traumatic ones that may result in lashing out against others. The
foundations are there, written in the gamer’s constant pursuit of friction.