Exploring gender discursive struggles about social inclusion in an online gaming community

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to adopt a critical relational dialectics framework to identify and explore gender discursive struggles about social inclusion observed in an online gaming community, in South Africa.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses a technique called contrapuntal analysis to identify and explore competing discourses in over 200 messages on gender struggles about social inclusion posted in the local community's gamer discussion board, based on seven threads initiated by women gamer activists.

Findings – The findings show how four interrelated gender discursive struggles about social inclusion and social exclusion animated the meanings of online gamer relations: *dominance versus equality, stereotyping versus diversity, competitiveness versus cooperativeness, and privilege versus empowerment.*

Practical applications – Game designers should reinforce more accurate and positive stereotypes to cater for the rapidly growing female gamer segment joining the online gaming market and to develop a less chauvinistic and more diversely representative online gaming community. Enlightened gamers should exercise greater solidarity in fighting for gender equality in online gaming communities.

Originality/value – The critical relational dialectics analysis adopted in this study offers a promising avenue to understand and critique the discursive struggles that arise when online gamers from the different gender groups relate. The findings highlight the unequal discursive power and privilege of many white male gamers when discussing social inclusion. Advancing our understanding of these discursive struggles creates the possibilities for improving social inclusion in online gaming communities.

Keywords Social inclusion, gender, online gaming, contrapuntal analysis, critical relational dialectics

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

For more than two decades, researchers have reported that video game designs are highly masculine (Bryce and Rutter, 2003; Cote, 2017; Downs and Smith, 2010; Hartmann and Klimmt, 2006; Kaye and Pennington, 2016; King *et al.*, 1991; Maccallum-Stewart, 2008; Salter and Blodgett, 2012). Content analysis by Glaubke *et al.* (2001) found that females were included in only 16% of the characters in popular video games. Similarly, Downs and Smith (2010) found bestselling games to include far more male characters than female characters. In fact, Downs and Smith (2010) add that players had far more choice in playing non-human than female characters. Irrespective of genre, game lead characters were disproportionately biased towards males. In contrast, female characters were more likely to be limited to playing the role of a "prop", "bystander" or as a victim of aggression (Glaubke *et al.*, 2001; Burgess *et al.*, 2007; Near, 2013). Female characters generally wore sexually revealing clothing compared to male characters – that is female characters were ten times more likely to be shown partially or fully nude than male characters (Jansz and Martis, 2007; Glaubke *et al.*, 2001) and female characters, especially females of colour, serve as 'sexual eye-candy' (Leonard, 2003). Even game reviews mentioned male characters 75% of the time while female characters are only mentioned 33% of the time (Ivory, 2006). In the massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs), customized avatar characters created by users were still disproportionately white males compared to females and other minority groups (Fox *et al.*, 2015; Waddell, 2014). This trivialization of women is also evident in professional or competitive video gaming. Compared to the highest male gamer's total career earnings of about $3.5 million, the best-paid female gamer earned a paltry $180,000 (Needleman, 2017).

The social exclusion of women is not limited to game designs and professional gaming but includes structural inequalities, such as the underrepresentation of women in the employment and ownership of the gaming industry. The International Game Developers Association (IGDA, 2014) reported that women make up only 22% of the global game developer community. According to Game Developers Conference (GDC, 2016), there are only 18% of women game developers in advanced economies like

the USA. A study on the Republic of South Africa (RSA) – the national context of this study – found that the situation was slightly worse with only 14% women game developers represented in the industry (IESA, 2016). The study also found a similar trend for the demographics of ownership in RSA, where white males control a majority (91%) of the game development studios. From a gender perspective, it is also problematic that women control only 3% of the industry.

The digital divide also exacerbates the inclusion of women and engenders male exclusiveness in online games. Similar to most developing countries, more men use the Internet in South Africa than women do. A study found that 48% of men use the Internet in South Africa compared to only 28% of women (Deen-Swarray *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, Internet use in South Africa has been rather slow due to limited connectivity and prohibitive cost of services. South Africa's costs are the most expensive out of all leading African economies. Although broadband access in the country has almost doubled over the last two years, penetration remains very low at only 870 000 households considering that the national population exceeds 56 million people (Deen-Swarray *et al.*, 2012).

Not surprisingly, when World of Warcraft (WoW), the biggest Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) video game peaked at over 11.5 million subscribed players throughout the globe, only about 7000 subscribers were from South Africa (Statista, 2008). Consider for a moment that Blizzard Entertainment, the publisher of the WOW game, earned an income on this game alone, that exceeded the gross domestic product (GDP) of more than 30 countries (World Bank, 2009). Meanwhile, many local gamers have to connect to servers hosted in Europe and the US and experience high latencies between 500 and 1000 milliseconds, as leading online games require at least 20,000 players for it to be economically feasible for global gaming companies to host a local server in a country (Sheldon *et al.*, 2003). Despite these issues, the overall gaming market in South Africa has been growing in double digits. The market is expected to increase by 16% in 2018 and the more affluent consumers are expected to play more games online.

South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world. A Gini coefficient at 0.62 indicates that while many people are affluent, many more, especially people from black race and ethnic groups, continue to be excluded from wealth, and live below the poverty line. Nevertheless, there is a rapidly growing female gamer segment, predominantly from the privileged white ethnic groups, joining the local online gaming market. Industry statistics suggest that this is a global phenomenon – for example, 45% of game players in the US are now women (Entertainment Software Association, 2018), although male gamers still dominate massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs, or MMOs for short). Meanwhile, many non-playing women view games as a waste of time that could be better spent on more important real-world priorities (Royse *et al.*, 2007).

Some researchers argue that women's struggle to be included in joining online gaming communities express more concerns about gamer culture than game design and the digital divide factors alluded to above (Braithwaite, 2014; Hartmann and Klimmt, 2006; Pulos, 2013). It is therefore important to improve our understanding of the social dimensions of playing online games. Given the increase in female gamers in online gaming communities and the impact gender relations has on the experiences of gamers, some scholars have argued for the importance of understanding gamer communicative practices, and in particular, how women gamers discursively negotiate the relational challenges that they experience (Kim and Yun, 2007; van Zoonen, 2002). One potential scholarly avenue is to understand how power inequalities between men and women are being ideologically sustained and reproduced in the online gaming environment. However, the underlying meaning systems that inform gender relations have rarely been tackled in the context of online games (Ducheneaut *et al.*, 2006; Li *et al.*, 2008).

Relational dialectics theory (RDT), developed by Baxter and her colleagues (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2009; Baxter and Montgomery, 1996) by drawing from the work of Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, can be used to develop theoretical insights about gender discursive struggles in a gaming community. By modifying Baxter's relational dialectics theory (RDT) (Baxter, 2011) to offer a critical relational dialectics perspective, our study frames online gaming communities as sites of differential power and

struggle (Deetz, 1992). Unlike traditional interpretive approaches that presuppose a stable, consensual, unified, and shared conception of meaning and culture in ICT contexts (Cushman and McLean, 2008), RDT's dialogical perspective regards meaning-making as fragmented, contested, tensional, and multivocal (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2009). More specifically, the importance of social processes where dialectics are central to social interaction has the potential to provide useful insights into social inclusion. A few researchers have drawn on a relational dialectics approach to gain insights into the struggles of social inclusion (Papa, Singhal, and Papa, 2006). Since the RDT perspective accounts for contradictory processes in social interaction, it can provide a strong complement to existing research on social inclusion in ICT (Cushman and McLean, 2008). This study assumes that sensitizing concepts from RDT can lead to an enhanced understanding of discursive struggles about social inclusion in a gaming community.

The objective of this research is to understand gender discursive struggles about social inclusion in an online gaming community. We were particularly interested in the interplay of competing discourses about social inclusion that were circulating in an online gaming community and how these discourses were shaping gender relationships. More specifically, our study investigates the persistence of gender inequality in gaming by closely scrutinising the gender ideologies present when gamers relate in online gaming environments (Pulos, 2013). Because female gamers are embedded in a culture in which competing or spending leisure time with males is generally regarded with prejudice, female gamers face the challenge of persuading male gamers, who may or may not have internalized that cultural prejudice, of their right to social inclusion. The prejudice that surrounds female gamer concerns suggests that the genre of feminist gamer activist posts (FGAP) is a likely discursive site in which competing systems of meaning may be at play. While many online gaming research tends to rely on interviews and surveys (Chen, *et al.*, 2016), this study examines the competing discourses that animate activist posts in a natural setting (Payton and Kvasny, 2012). Understanding the interplay of these discursive struggles in the context of an online gaming community can promote gender inclusion. They can provide insights into how the gaming industry can improve women developer representations in the workplace and improve game designs so that they represent a broader audience.

They can provide guidance on how to mobilise more male gamers to act in solidarity with women gamers to achieve better gender equality in gaming. These insights can also inform the role of the state in promoting diversity and equality in the gaming industry and the promotion of games with gender equitable content. The goal of this study is to demonstrate the power struggles facing women gamers and to expose and critique the forms of ideological domination and distortion exercised by male gamers when relating, with the hope of liberating oppressed women gamers from these forms of social exclusion (Deetz, 1992; Trauth, 2013).

Including this introduction, this paper is divided into seven sections. The second section reviews the social inclusion literature and discusses current research on online gaming and gender, and specifically the prejudicial cultural and relational discourses that persist. The third section proposes a critical relational dialectics framework for analysis that the authors derived from modifying relational dialectics theory. The fourth section explains our methodology for data collection and analysis based on Baxter's process of contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011) and Deetz's classic work on politics and meaning dominating everyday discursive practices in organizations (Deetz, 1992). The fifth section presents the results of our contrapuntal analysis. In the sixth section, the main results of this critical relational dialectics approach and the key contributions to the gender, IS and technology literature are discussed. The paper concludes with a summary of key contributions in understanding online gaming gender relations, acknowledgments of limitations, and directions for future research on gender relations and social inclusion in other social spaces mediated by technology.

Online Gaming Communities as Gendered Spaces

Social exclusion is viewed by some scholars as a contested concept that has multiple meanings. According to Taket *et al.* (2009), this concept has been used by socialist politicians in France to refer to citizens not covered by the social security system. Social exclusion has been used to refer to the unemployed, disaffected youth and the homeless. It has also been used to describe people who have

no access to employment, education and technology. A broader definition views social exclusion as a dynamic process of marginalising, silencing or segregating people from social, cultural, political, or economic life (Byrne, 2005). This definition assumes that social exclusion is not self-induced but refers to action taken by a one group to deny or block out another group. On the other hand, social inclusion recognises the rights of excluded groups to equity, justice, acceptance and opportunity (Taket *et al.*, 2009).

From a development economics perspective, social inclusion refers to people's rights to valuable capabilities to build meaningful lives (Sen 1999). Conceptualising social inclusion in ICT has expanded from traditional notions of digital divides, such as ICT access, computer literacy, information "haves" and "have-nots," underrepresentation in the digital economy, to more contemporary digital divide issues, such as participation in digital spaces (Gorbacheva. 2013; Cushman and McLean, 2008). ICTs, such as the Internet and social media, are enabling new ways of communicating and relating by promoting political engagement and cultural and social participation (Andrade and Doolin, 2016).

These digital spaces are also major sites for participating in recreational or leisure activities in the form of online video games, and competitive electronic sports in the form of organized, multiplayer online video game competitions. However, similar to physical spaces, digital spaces are not utopias for social inclusion. This study recognizes that social structures in digital spaces imposed by dominant or privileged groups are also constraining other groups from participating fully in modern social, cultural, political, or economic life. While this study is in solidarity with those excluded, it also recognizes the ability of excluded people to exercise their agency power and together with the support of state institutions, labour, civil society and the private sector, achieve improvements that will enhance their participation in digital spaces.

Some IS scholars have recognised the need to address a number of challenges facing women in the job market and the workplace, such as the under-representation and decline of women in ICT

education and work. These scholars have also investigated the barriers affecting women's career choice and advancement in ICT, and labor and skills shortages caused in part by the under-representation of women (Gorbacheva, 2013; Trauth and Howcroft 2006). From a technology acceptance perspective, there have only been a few attempts to understand how the trust differences between men and women can influence their decisions to use online technologies (Gefen and Straub, 1997; Trauth *et al.*, 2016), confirming a general lack of attention paid to gender in mainstream technology acceptance research. Feminist-inspired gender and IS researchers have criticised mainstream IS research for the under-theorization of gender in their research (Trauth, 2013, Howcroft and Trauth, 2008). Nevertheless, focusing on narrow technology acceptance factors is unlikely to address the rich social and cultural aspects of excluding women in digital spaces (Trauth and Howcroft 2006). Although, cultural dimensions in Web sites, in particular, gender signifiers in Web documents are being investigated (Zahedi *et al.*, 2006), online gaming communities as a sphere of social exclusion has not been given sufficient attention.

A dominant discourse of games and gender, in general, is that games are a gendered leisure activity that supports notions of male dominance and difference from women. Here there are many parallels between leisure activities and the social practices of organized sports where games and gender mutually constitute each other (Royse *et al.*, 2007). For the most part, playing games traditionally meant exhibiting male dominance (Messner, 1988). However, in recent times, gender has been constructed and resisted differently in many different activities viewed as leisure activities. For one, the physical practice of playing online games involves little that conforms to the dominant ideals of masculinity, such as strength and aggression, but has still become a new site for constructions of masculinity. To date, a number of deductively oriented studies investigated the factors that accounted for the gender gap in video game designs. According to these studies, women tend to dislike games where the game content emphasises sexist gender role portrayals (Leonard, 2003), violence (Ferguson, 2007), competitive elements (Vermeulen *et al.*, 2014) and lack of social interaction (Hartmann and Klimmt, 2006). Van Zoonen (2002: 6) questions these findings arguing, "both technology and gender are multidimensional processes that are articulated in complex and

contradictory ways which escape straightforward gender definitions." Similarly, Haraway (1991) argues that women should rather grapple with the contradictory and potentially dangerous meanings of these technologies if they are to help steer its future development and implementation.

To date, only a few inductively oriented studies have examined how gender is being discursively constructed within these contemporary forms of social practices. Pearce (2017) analysed chat log data using conversation analytic techniques and observed players using stereotypical language practices to perform gendered identities. Salter and Blodgett (2012) found that within an online gaming community, hypermasculine discourse observed male players essentialising gender and privileging overt masculinity over femininity, thus discouraging women from engaging in gendered discourse. Using critical discourse analysis, Braithwaite (2014) also found that a WoW community's set of forum threads debating a contested female character, treated feminists as threats to their community. Similarly, Pulos (2013) analysis of messages posted on a WoW discussion board also found that gamers who did not fit in with a heteronormative lifestyle faced severe hostility. Cote (2017) used in-depth interviews with female gamers to explore women's strategies for coping with online game-related harassment. Studies that have recently analysed men's rights activist (MRA) groups posts on the Internet show how they provide resources to elevate men's supposed subordinated position in relation to women and minorities (Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016). Several exclusive online female gaming communities, such as FragDolls, GamerchiX, Pandora's Mighty Soldiers (or PMS clan) are also acting as social support system to empower female gamers. Meanwhile, websites like www.fatuglyorslutty.com are providing repositories for misogynistic comments and spaces for discussing sexual harassment targeting female gamers. However, the current gaming literature silences many experiences and contexts about women in gaming communities.

No study to date has systematically explored current representations of gender through feminist gamer activist posts (FGAP) that address the complex and contradictory nature of gender discursive struggles in a gaming community. We define feminist gamer activists as the authors who posted threads that explicitly sought to bring about social change to gender relations in the gaming

community. It is critical to study feminist gamer activist posts (FGAP) that address online gamers in general, female gamers that have been victims of harassment, and chauvinistic male gamers. In posting these messages on the community's blog, feminist gamer activists are hoping to persuade gamers to prevent divisive online gender relations and to promote gender equity. The multiple addressivity that characterises FGAP presents the female gamer activist with a complicated rhetorical task. Feminist activist gamers are embedded in a culture in which female gamers are regarded with ambivalence at best. They face the challenge of persuading male gamers who have internalised the hostile or benevolent sexism that already exists in the everyday culture (Glick and Fiske, 2001). Thus to be effective, FGAP must be sensitive to the competing and ambivalent discourses about social inclusion that animate meanings of gender relations. Analysing these discursive struggles about social inclusion also increases our insight about everyday life ideologies of gender, power and privilege and the role of these discursive struggles in reproducing dominance and inequality in the online gaming environment. Following Sen (1999), the notion of social inclusion in this study focuses on the freedom of women gamers and how cultural and relational perspectives are preventing female gamers from enjoying the same opportunities and experiences as male gamers.

A Critical Relational Dialectics Analysis Framework

RDT, a dialogical theory developed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), is a popular communication theory employed by communication scholars. Dialogical theories conceptualise meaning-making between relating parties as an ambiguous, contentious and fragmented process (Deetz, 2001). As a theoretical framework, the first iteration of RDT produced novel insights about the discursive tensions concerning people in the midst of difficult relational experiences (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). Discursive tensions refer to the "dynamic interplay of opposing forces or contradictions" (Baxter and Brathwaite, 2006:3). For example, Baxter *et al.* (2002) found that the wives of Alzheimer's patients expressed discursive tensions as they attempted to make sense of their husband's physical presence

and mental absence. Baxter *et al.* (2006) found that stepchildren expressed discursive tensions with the involvement of their non-residential parents. Golish and Powell (2003) examined the dialectical tensions surrounding the ambiguous loss of a premature birth and the communication strategies used by parents to cope with the loss. Toller and Braithwaite (2009) found that parents who had lost a child expressed discursive tensions between grieving together as a couple and apart as individuals. As these studies illustrate, human relations are fraught with discursive tensions.

While RDT's initial dialogical conceptions emphasized the discursive tensions inherent in relating (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996), Baxter (2011) recently revised and extended the theory (referred to as "RDT 2.0") by focusing on Russian intellectual, Mikhail Bakhtin's, more advanced conception of dialogism (Holquist, 1990). RDT 2.0 concepts place more emphasis on analyzing the interplay between competing discourses in making meaning as opposed to simply identifying lists of opposing discursive tensions between relating parties. This shift in emphasis has produced novel insights about how these competing discourses interplay to create meaning. For example, Norwood and Baxter (2011) identified the discursive struggles that animated the meaning of adoption in online letters from adoptive-seeking parents to birth mothers. Breshears and Braithwaite (2014) showed how children they interviewed resisted the negative cultural discourses about their lesbian and gay parents. Wenzel and Poynter (2014) found that older parents anticipating death invoked cultural and relational discourses to make sense of their relational change with their adult children.

The two critical concepts in RDT 2.0 for understanding these discursive struggles are the *utterance chain* and the *centripetal-centrifugal* struggle (Baxter, 2011). First, the utterance a person makes – what is spoken in one conversational turn – is part of a larger utterance chain that exists in the social world (Baxter, 2011). Simply put, a given utterance cannot be understood as isolated from other utterances and therefore relationships cannot be understood as isolated from cultural systems of meaning. According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), four types of utterance links exist in a given utterance: *distal already-spokens, proximal already-spokens, proximal not-yet-spokens* and *distal not-yet-spokens*. The distal already-spoken link in the utterance chain refers to mainstream systems of

meaning circulating in a society that relating members voice when constructing meaning. The proximal already-spoken link refers to past meanings that collide with present meanings in a relationship. The proximal not-yet-spoken link anticipates the immediate response from the hearer in an interaction. The distal not-yet-spoken link refers to utterances that anticipate the response from generalized others. The proximal not-yet-spoken link is related to the addressivity concept – that is, knowledge that an utterance is addressed to someone. This link focuses one's analytic attention to the ways in which utterances take into account the potential response of those addressed.

In the context of posts initiated by female gamers on gender issues, male gamers arguably take into account how female gamers could respond to their response. However, because male gamers cannot respond based on a particularized knowledge of female gamers, they must address their stereotyped image of female gamers. In this sense, the female gamer as an image stands in as what Baxter (2011) calls a superaddressee. That is, the male gamer must imagine how a typical female gamer would likely respond. This anticipation necessarily brings us to the matter of cultural discourses—the distal already spoken— because imaginary female gamers, to some extent, live in the same cultural world as male gamers. The distal already-spoken link in the utterance chain refers to discourses that circulate in the culture at large and which function as a semantic backdrop for the current utterance. For example, competing discourses of social inclusion and social cohesion are prominent in the South African culture and permeate the talk of many South Africans (Moffett, 2006). These cultural discourses are symbolic resources drawn on by individuals to help constitute experiences, as well as personal and relational identities.

In her latest iteration of RDT, Baxter (2011) focuses on the multiple and often competing discourses (or systems of meaning) that fill every utterance. She urges us to understand how the interplay of competing discourses constructs meanings for relating parties. Especially crucial for this study on gender relations, Baxter (2011) observes that discourses are hardly ever on an equal footing when relating parties are struggling for meaning. Also analytically important then is Bahktin's concept of centripetal-centrifugal struggle. Baxter (2011) highlights the inequality of discursive struggles by

distinguishing between centripetal and centrifugal discourses. At the analytical center of a RDT study are discourses that are voiced during interaction. However, studies should also pay special attention to those voices that are marginalized or silenced. RDT's focus on 'power-located-in-discourse' offers a departure from mainstream analysis of relationships, which tends to ignore differential power dynamics (Baxter, 2011). In RDT's conception, power is also located in individual subjects and social groups. Centripetal discourses are centred, such as the legitimated normative discourse of patriarchal values in the South African culture (Bozzoli, 1983; Meer, 2005). Conversely, deviant or centrifugal discourses are marginalized, such as the suppression of women's meanings and values (Bozzoli, 1983; Meer, 2005).

The interplay of discourses can happen in two overarching ways, diachronically and synchronically (Baxter, 2011). Diachronic separation is characterized by a shift in the centered and marginalized discourses over time. Synchrony interplay is characterized by the animation of competing discourses at one point in time. This type of interplay can exist at the distal already-spoken level where a speaker's utterance constitutes struggle between co-existing discourses that compete in the larger culture, and at the proximal not-yet-spoken level where a speaker's utterance anticipates fragmented responses from the addressee (Baxter, 2011).

We chose in the current study to examine the genre of female gamer activist posts (FGAP) from a critical dialogic lens. Posts that result from topics that attempt to promote gender equality and call for social change in a gaming community's discussion board are novel sites for stimulating reflection, dialogue and debate among gamers representing the different gender groups. That is, we conceptualized the gamer posts as an utterance located as part of a larger utterance chain that responds to prior utterances (the distal already-spokens of cultural discourses relevant to gaming) and anticipates responses from the addressee, the imagined women/male gamer (the proximal not-yet-spoken) (Table 1). Thus, the research question that organized the analysis was simply, *"What are the competing discourses, if any, in gamer posts about the social inclusion of women and how does their interplay construct the meaning(s) of social inclusion in gender gaming relations?"*

Table 1. Four Types of Utterance Links

Type	Description
The distal already-spokens	An utterance located as part of a larger utterance chain that responds to prior utterances (the *distal already-spokens* of larger cultural discourses relevant to gaming)
The proximal already-spokens	Past interactions or meanings serve as a backdrop for present interactions or meanings
The proximal not-yet-spokens	Anticipates responses from the addressee – the imagined women/male gamer (the *proximal not-yet-spoken*).
The distal not-yet-spokens	Anticipates responses from the generalised other or how the superaddressee will respond to an utterance – the imagined women/male gamer (the *distal not-yet-spokens*).

Source: Adapted from Baxter (2011)

Following RDT, discourses originate not in a person's private experience, but in the discursive culture gamers inhabit. However, unlike RDT's neutral interpretive paradigmatic stance, this study takes an explicit a priori interest in the role of power, domination and distortion and is therefore critical in its orientation (Deetz, 2001; Trauth, 2013). Baxter's RDT does not explicitly explore intersections of race, class, and gender and the formation of social identities and differential power structures. This study takes as its starting point the idea that men as a group exert power over women, and that the notions of masculinity reproduce these unequal relations and ultimately gendered meanings in online gaming. In this study, we intend to demonstrate and critique the oppression of women in an online gaming community. More specifically, our task here is to interrogate the discourse of gamers for implicit or explicit patriarchal ideologies (Bozzoli, 1983; Meer, 2005). These forms of power relations are instrumental in the understanding of gender discourses.

Methodology

Following the guidelines of McKenna *et al.* (2017), we collected data from a popular community website's discussion board for South African online gamers, called GameZone (www.gamezone.co.za). GameZone's 'Opinions' menu is easily accessible to local players and the public. Users can also type their query into a search bar on the main menu to access threads posted on

specific issues of interests. All discussion threads are open to the public and are not password protected. Once directed to the opinions forum, the initial thread appears first and every subsequent response follows it. The discussion board posts about five to ten threads a day. Each response is located in relation to a name and picture of the commentator. A few players raised their concerns about gender on the discussion board. Our data collection began in 2017. All threads since the inception of the online community that matched our criteria of "gender", "women" and "female" were included in our analysis. There is a general lack of attention towards gender issues in this particular gaming community. The majority of the discussion boards focused on upcoming gaming events, tournaments, the latest gaming technologies, news, video game previews and reviews. The GameZone player community is very diverse in their choice of games and thus discussions can occur on any genre. In the threads we looked at, the games most commonly discussed were Overwatch, a first-person shooter and various role-playing-games such as Tomb Raider. We found only eight threads concerning topics of gender during the period 2013 to 2016. In total about 200 comments were made in response to these eight threads. In our chosen threads, 65 unique commenters were identified. Only 15% (n=10) of these were female, the majority of 63% (n=41) were male, and a further 22% (n=14) of them were marked as 'unknown'. Just one of the eight threads we examined was created by a male author. Names have been anonymised to prevent harassment to the subjects (Eysenbach and Till, 2001).

The first thread that appeared in response to the search term 'gender' directly addresses online abuse of women gamers. Created by Koala (May 06, 2013), the first thread "GTFO is a documentary about online abuse of female gamers," received 20 comments. The second thread addresses the presence of harassment in the game industry. Created by Lana (July 24, 2014), the third thread "We need to talk about the harassment of women in the game industry," received 92 comments. A fourth thread created by Sonique (September 04, 2014) was entitled "Conversations we should have: The importance of diversity in video games", received 8 comments. A fifth thread by Lana related to gender (August 26, 2014) "Adult women play more games than boys under 18," received only 6 comments. A sixth thread by Lana (March 11, 2015) on "When top mobile games exploit gender to make more cash,"

received 10 comments. A seventh thread by Owen (April 24, 2015) on "An inside look at SA's game development industry" received 7 comments. An eight thread by Starwanderer (November 11, 2016)
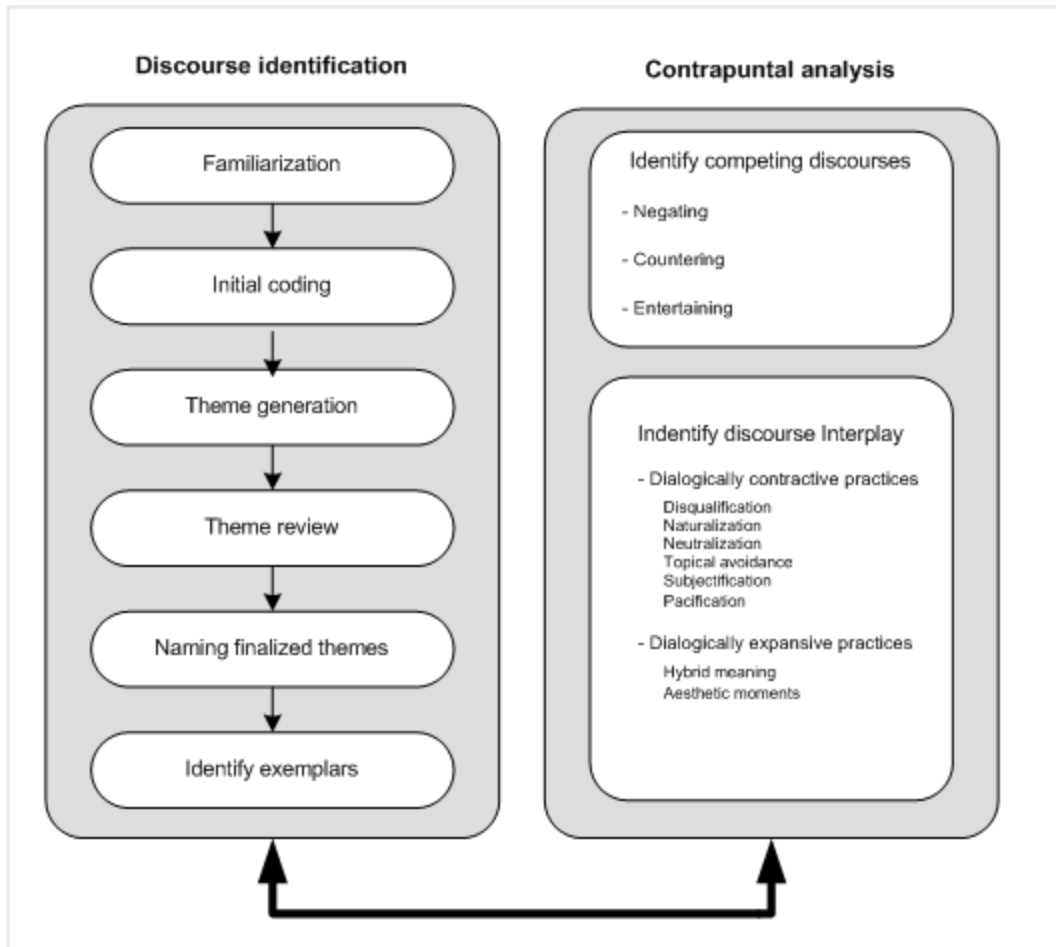

Figure 1. Process of contrapuntal analysis (Adapted from Baxter, 2011).

on "About being a female in a male dominated game" received 54 comments. Because the website protects the identities of the thread creators and commenters, demographic information with respect to age, ethnicity, or educational background was not available. Due to the nature of the topics discussed in these threaded discussions, it was found that many of the participants disclosed their gender when commenting in order to strengthen/argue their viewpoint. For example, the gender of the thread commenter was determined by identifying statements such as, 'As a female gamer' or 'I have experienced this issue as well as a female gamer,' in response to the topics written. While some gamers chose to be anonymous, many revealed their usernames and/or uploaded pictures of themselves. We used this as evidence to determine the gender of the discussion thread authors and

commenters. In selecting these threads, we acknowledge that a single gaming community cannot account for the views of all South African gamers. While relational dialectical processes are universal, we acknowledge that discourses can vary from context to context. In order not to lose sight of contextual issues, particularities of this South African gaming community were central to our analysis (Davison and Martinsons, 2016).

A contrapuntal analysis was performed on the posts (Baxter, 2011: 161-164). Contrapuntal analysis is a type of discourse analysis that identifies the interplay of competing discourses in the text. Baxter (2011) prescribes three mandatory steps in contrapuntal analysis: first, identify the discourses; second, identify whether these discourses are competing; and third, identify the interplay between these competing discourses. To identify discourses in the posts, Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for identifying thematic categories was adopted. The authors read the data sets multiple times and worked independently to generate a set of thematic categories. The authors then worked collaboratively with an independent judge to give common labels to the exhaustive list of codes for themes that emerged during this iterative process. Themes were compared to prior and new themes and assigned to new or existing categories. Following Baxter (2011), analytical questions were formulated to focus on the broader context of meanings. For example, the broad analytical question of interest in the current study was: "What discursive struggles give meaning to gamer gender relations?" In addition, the authors jointly identified the discourses that were constituted by these thematic categories until they were satisfied that the joint analysis of discourses adequately reflected the data set.

Table 2. Types of discourse markers

Type	Description
Negating	*Negating* acknowledges a competing discursive position for the sake of rejecting it. For example, if a male gamer says, "I don't believe I should treat women gamers any different from the way I treat men gamers," the discourse of equality is voiced in order to dismiss democratic values.
Countering	*Countering* replaces a dominant discourse with an alternative discourse. For example, if a male gamer says, "Women are not competitive *even though* they are fun to play with," his claim of accepting women gamers because they are fun to play with counters the dominant discursive position that women are not

competitive gamers.

Entertaining	Entertaining takes several discursive positions. For example, if a male gamer says, "I *might* play with a woman if my guild insisted," highlights that he entertains two possible discursive positions

Source: Adapted from Martin and White (2005) and Baxter (2011)

The authors then applied discourse markers, such as *negating, countering, and entertaining*, to identify competing discourses (Table 2). *Negating* acknowledges a competing discursive position for the sake of rejecting it. For example, if a male gamer says, "I don't believe I should treat women gamers any different from the way I treat men gamers," the discourse of equality is voiced in order to dismiss values that are inclusive. *Countering* replaces a dominant discourse with an alternative discourse. For example, if a male gamer says, "Women are not competitive *even though* they are fun to play with," his claim of including women gamers because they are fun to play with counters the dominant discursive position that women are not competitive gamers. Finally, *entertaining* takes several discursive positions. For example, if a male gamer says, "I *might* play with a woman if my guild insisted," highlights that he entertains two possible discursive positions.

Table 3. Types of dialogically contractive and expansive discursive practices

Type	Description
Disqualification (-)	Denies a person or group a voice because they lack expertise or the right to expression.
Naturalization (-)	Reifies a discursive position as being a natural position.
Neutralization (-)	Treats value-laden discursive positions as being value-free.
Topical avoidance (-)	Treats certain discursive positions as being off limits for discussion.
Subjectification (-)	Silences a discursive position by arguing that the speaker is entitled to his opinion.
Pacification (-)	Treats differences as trivial or futile to resolve.
Hybrid meaning (+)	Hybrid meaning shapes a both/and semantic logic as opposed to an either/or logic.
Aesthetic moments (+)	An aesthetic moment occurs when the interpenetration of discourses reconstructs each meaning system in a profound way.

Source: Adapted from Deetz (1992) and Baxter (2011)

After identifying the competing discourses, the authors finally turned their attention to the analysis of discursive interplays. Here, Baxter (2011) recommends that researchers focus on the discursive details of the centripetal-centrifugal struggle when analysing how dominant/authoritative/monological and marginalized discourses interpenetrate. Simply put, discursive practices that centred (centripetal) and marginalized (centrifugal) discourses were identified. Baxter (2011) refers to *dialogically contractive* and *dialogically expansive* discursive practices (Table 3). Dialogically contractive practices establish or sustain the dominant or centripetal discourse by excluding other voices. Critical scholars such as Deetz (1992) identified six main contractive practices: (1) *Disqualification* denies a person or group a voice because they lack expertise or the right to expression; (2) *Naturalization* reifies a discursive position as being a natural position; (3) *Neutralization* treats value-laden discursive positions as being value-free; (4) *Topical avoidance* treats certain discursive positions as being off limits for discussion; (5) *Subjectification* silences a discursive position by arguing that the speaker is entitled to his opinion; (6) *Pacification* positions differences as trivial or futile to resolve. Discourses can also be pacified by seeking a consensus, or through co-opting another valued discourse (Deetz, 1992). A dialogically expansive discursive practice acknowledges the voices of others and expands the possibilities for joint meaning-making and moves closer to or reaches idealized dialogue. These transformative practices include the creation of *hybrid meaning* or *aesthetic moments* from competing discourses. *Hybrid meaning* shapes a both/and semantic logic as opposed to an either/or logic. An *aesthetic moment* occurs when the interpenetration of discourses reconstructs each meaning system in a profound way.

These sensitising concepts were applied now to understand the competing discourses between gamers from the different gender groups. Triangulation was assured by analysing the data during different periods and by comparing posts from the same and different threads to provide further confirmation of the themes found, and to throw more light on the contextual detail of the competing discourses. We also used informant triangulation by obtaining the view of different members of the gaming community, including gamer activists and male and female gamers. Our intention in using triangulation was not to smooth away contradictions in the data, but to obtain a much richer picture of

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what was going on in the gaming community we studied, thereby creating a deeper understanding of the competing discourses. Although the interplay analysis was conducted by the authors, the lead author and an independent judge met to discuss the analysis. The use of analytic memos facilitated this process. Finally, we selected exemplars to show the link between the data and the analysis. The analysis reveals that online gaming is a dynamic social space where dominant patriarchal ideologies are being perpetuated as well as being challenged and contested.

Results

Activist gamers used the posts on gaming blog platform to engage gamers about opposing gender discourses. For the most part, they described their relationship with many male gamers as negative, as well as sought solidarity from other male and women gamers. The majority of male gamers continued to marginalise these attempts to improve gender relations in favour of the prevailing sexist and exclusionary norms using dialogically contractive discursive practices. Overall, the posts focused on four topics: female gamer harassment, female character stereotyping, male gamer hypercompetitiveness and collusive employment networks in the gaming industry. The findings show how four interrelated gender discursive struggles about social inclusion animated the meanings of online gamer relations: *dominance versus equality, stereotyping versus diversity, competitiveness versus cooperativeness,* and *privilege versus empowerment.*

Table 4. Discursive struggles about social inclusion in a gaming community

Discursive struggles	Meaning	Example
Dominance-equality	We labelled the first discursive struggle of social inclusion as dominance-equality. It addresses male gamers legitimising their dominance over female gamers, while activists and their supporters calling for a more inclusive position built on values of equality.	• Male gamers who harass female gamers • Female gamers who use their sexuality and attractiveness to garner support from male gamers • Activists call for fair and equal treatment.
Stereotyping-diversity	The second discursive struggle of social inclusion deals with the dynamic interplay between stereotyping and diversity. It addresses gamers legitimising	• Female gamers "belong in the kitchen" • Female characters are "eye candy" for the straight white

	stereotyping, and at the same time activists and their supporters calling upon gamers to value diversity.	• male • The oversexualisation of characters and the need for diverse character representations. • Activists call for diverse representations in games.
Competitive-Cooperative	The third discursive struggle of social inclusion deals with the dynamic interplay of the radiants of competitiveness and with the radiants of cooperativeness. It addresses gamers legitimising masculine values, such as being individualistic, aggressive and selfish, and activists and their supporters embracing more altruistic values.	• Female gamers are "candy crush gamers" not "hardcore" gamers • Female gamers who fit in with male gamers are tomboys • Activists call for acknowledging and respecting the abilities of female gamers.
Privilege-Empowerment	The fourth discursive struggle of social inclusion deals with the dynamic interplay between privilege and empowerment. It addresses white male gamers legitimising their dominance in the gaming industry and activists and their supporters expressing concerns about the marginalisation and underrepresentation of white females and the black majority.	• The superior technical skills of white male developers • The superior entrepreneurial flair of white males • The assumption of a free and open market • Activists call for acknowledging a historical past that continues to influence the underrepresentation of white females and the black majority

Discursive Struggle #1: Exclusion by Harassment

The discourse of women harassment in online gaming should be viewed as part of the larger cultural discourses of gender-based violence in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa (Moffett, 2006) and women gamer harassment globally (Megarry, 2014). Moffett (2006) describes the South Africa's high rate of sexual and gender-based violence as a 'gender civil war' and Braithwaite (2014) describes global game communities as large cultural spaces for the harassment of women. Despite strong 'zero abuse tolerance' policies on harassment and the availability of moderators to enforce sanctions, gaming companies are struggling to prevent let alone stop harassment.

In their posts concerning harassment, activists attempted to bring to the centre of attention the discourse of women revealing their harassment experiences. This discourse was deployed using multiple subthemes. For example, it was constituted in the talk of activists when they persuaded gamers to 'speak out' against women harassment and not to 'distance' themselves from discussions

on this form of abuse. A major challenge for activists is that the majority of female gamers tended to 'avoid' the topic of harassment as they feared further harassment. Lana, who anticipated the 'denial' of harassment by many women gamers, said:

> Allow me to focus on a different aspect of the issue, one that I've seen pop up on various discussions right here in friendly South Africa. "It's not happened to me and I've been in gaming for sooo long and therefore the issue of harassment of women in gaming is overrated." I wanna bet that it's happened to you in some way, you just didn't recognise it as such, because you are desensitised to it, accept it as the norm, or you want to show how strong you are and that "these things' don't bother you. I know, 'cause that's exactly what I went through, until I forced myself to take a step back and really look at my experiences in gaming. Before you jump in and stamp me as a feminist, allow me to explain.

Lana argues that because women gamers are desperate for acceptance they make subtle compromises that devalue what it means be a women. She goes on to claim that some women use their sexuality and attractiveness to garner support from male gamers. This acceptance of the prevailing discourse to be the norm serves only to reinforce the exclusionary culture. Lana anticipates responses from addressees that will 'stamp' her as a feminist and, perhaps somewhat ironically, wishes to maintain her identity as a regular female gamer. She is aware that once she is cast as a 'whiny' feminist, either she will be 'mocked', her posts will be ignored, or her arguments will be dismissed (Braithwaite, 2014).

Opposition male gamers used negating and countering to supplant the discourse of 'normal' male harassment of female gamers. They distinguished 'normal' male gamers from 'online trolls' and the 'immature male' who were really to be blamed for harassment in general, thus deflecting the issue. Trolls intentionally post inflammatory information to provoke users. By claiming that the behaviour of 'online trolls' or the 'immature male' is the 'real' issue facing the harassment of gamers in general, male gamers were minimising and replacing the discourse of the 'normal' male harassment of female gamers. These responses by Heinrich, Jaco and Ruan respectively typify the dialogically contractive discursive practices that 'normal' male gamers adopted to subtly reject centering the problem of female harassment:

I just wanted to write you a note saying you are fighting a good fight and this was a worthwhile article to write. I sure hope one day, female gamers won't look at the creators .. and associate them with normal male gamers ... the examples you make of online trolls are the very worst aspects surrounding women in gaming.

I feel for the woman that get attacked online but don't always see it as being a woman because there are PLENTY of men out there that get treated badly because they are bad at gaming or have weird personalities that do not fit into the 'cool' category.

I condemn any form of harassment not just against woman. This include Religion, Language, Sex. Don't think this only happens in the gaming industry try being a woman in the engineering field or a woman doctor exactly the same thing happens.

In the above excerpt, Ruan reifies the discursive position of women harassment as a natural position in fields dominated by men. Tahir takes a more dialogically expansive approach below, acknowledging the frequency and differences in the kinds of harassment women experience. He also challenges the male gamers for playing the 'victim'.

Er, I'm not sure what you're trying to say, but women are harassed daily in various capacities. Whether online or offline, it's still different to what men experience... The "real world" is one where women are targeted and it'd be nice if more people accepted that instead of crying about the "poor" men.

In a few other moments of dialogically expansive discursive practices, male gamers pointed to anonymity, lack of consequences, and leniency by moderators as contributory factors to the women harassment problem.

...how many of us even let slip on a daily basis without malice, I know I'm guilty every now and again and although the intent is not there, I can understand how they could affect people's self worth.

Not all male gamers harass female gamers in the conventional sense. Starwanderer, a female gamer activist, defines male gamers as being 'jerks', 'indifferent' and a 'white knight'. She views the jerk as the typical male harasser. Strangely, for Starwanderer, the indifferent male gamer is her ideal category of male gamer, as he will not mind gender as long as you play at the requisite skill level. On the other

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hand, the white knight 'harasses' the female gamer with lavish gestures. This sycophantic behaviour is manipulative and insincere, in that it preys on the women gamer's perceived susceptibility to flattery.

> Once he finds out you're a female he completely changes. He defends your honour for no apparent reason, not that you needed help or that someone's comment bothered you anyway. He buys you wards…. He acts more than friendly to you, and you don't even have him as a friend on Steam, but he sends you a friend request anyway.

Sycophantic behaviour by heterosexual men toward women is common in broader society, largely because they stereotype women as being intellectually weak. However, not all male gamers are seeking to impress or get attention from female gamers. Unfortunately, those men who are sincerely speaking out against sexism are also labelled as "white knights".

Discursive Struggle #2: Exclusion by Character Stereotyping

The discourse of women character stereotyping in online gaming is part of the larger cultural discourses about gender stereotypes in society, in the entertainment industry, professional sports and the online environment. In their posts concerning the need for diverse character representations in gaming, activists and their supporters called for more diverse character representations in gaming and negated the alternative discourse of women character stereotyping in gaming as being natural. A major challenge for activists is that the majority of female gamers tended to avoid debating the topic of women character stereotyping. Seline, who appears to be a long term member of the local gaming community argues that it is not due to apathy that there is female inaction, or not a big enough outcry by local women on this topic, but it is the 'fear' instead, of the repercussions of 'speaking out' that holds them back. Seline, who anticipated a poor show of responses by women gamers on the topic of the over sexualisation of female characters, said:

> In the while that I have written ... I don't think I've seen even a handful of comments from women. When speaking with a local colleague .. she finished my sentence with 'because they're afraid to comment'... it can be assumed that women have as much to say about issues on gender as their male counterparts do ... one reasonable explanation for their absence is the history of aggression shown to women in these spaces. A pretty tell-tale sign

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of how far we still have to go towards inclusion and empowerment. We need more women and men engaging in these debates thoughtfully. This is in part because women are not innocent in sexualising women's presence in video games and as gamers. I know there will be male dissenters that will still think that the Overwatch drama was uncalled for, so I would like to propose a thought exercise...

The heroes in most online games are heterosexual white males while female characters are generally 'eye candy' for the straight white male. Seline argues that portraying female characters sexually or as damsels in distress reinforces the patriarchal view that females are 'fragile' and 'inferior'. Discursive themes such as ending the role of men in dictating how female characters are represented, taking a stand against the misrepresentation of female characters in games, calling for more female characters in lead roles, and the removal of oversexualised characters, constructed the discourse of more diverse character representations in gaming.

In contrast, Marlene claims that Seline and people like her are overreacting. In the excerpt below, she silences Seline's discursive position by arguing that she is entitled to her 'own opinion.' She rejects this discourse on oversexualised characters by claiming that it is in the innate nature of characters to be more sexualised. The use of subjectification – arguing that this is a matter of individual opinion – is powerful in closing down challenges from the competing discursive position.

> Normally, I'd wholeheartedly agree with you about the oversexualization of female character. However, Blizzard really has made a diverse cast of character in Overwatch.... Those other characters are more sexualized because it's part of their characters. ....Everyone is entitled to their own opinions on the matters (obviously) but I seriously think people are overreacting to this issue.

In general, male gamers also rejected the discourse on women character stereotyping. In addition to subjectification, his 'own view', Karl in the excerpt below also uses naturalization to position over sexualisation as a natural phenomenon in the 'real world' arguing that the representation of gaming characters is merely a reflection of the way things are, that is, characters are reified.

> I have to disagree here. I think people are blowing this way out of proportion. My standpoint is this: IF a person really wants equality and accurate representation, then there has to be room for characters with a more

sexualized personality, because in the real world, there are people with a more sexually focused personality who use their sexuality (be it male or female) in different ways. So to ask for removal of this character is actually against diversity, freedom of expression and equality. Would love to hear back on this, maybe I'm completely wrong. Still, good read and opinion, just not my own view, so debating ;)

In the excerpt below, Dirk displaces the discourse on stereotypical female character representation by proclaiming that stereotypical representations also apply equally to men in both gaming and movies. However, the physical appearance of male game characters, including hairstyles, clothing, and armour, is not seen to be "slutty" by male gamers.

> Those are things that women stereotypically find sexy (except the overly musclebound bit, but men typically want to look like that for some reason so the same argument applies), just as men stereotypically find thin, curvy women sexy... I'm jealous of every male character in gaming nowadays. But at the same time, I want to be those men. Sadly, people focus only on women's representation in gaming. I fully understand why. History treated women and men differently, so female representation is a touchier subject with good reason, but please remain open to the fact that males are also overly sexualized in gaming (and in movies).

Similar to the research findings of Pulos (2013), male characters are stereotypically hypermasculine and female characters are hypersexualized because character designs are based on a heteronormative framework. These patterns of exclusion are not reflected just within the games where women are often presented women in background roles supporting a man's heroic quest, but appear within the gaming community itself. It is also difficult for some male and female gamers to acknowledge that they are appropriating a voice of feminism.

Discursive Struggle #3: Exclusion by Male Hyper Competitiveness

The third struggle is located as part of a larger utterance chain pertaining to the exclusion of women in social spheres that have and continues to be dominated by men. In their posts, activists constructed female gamers in a positive light, especially about their skills, abilities, and growing numbers, and that they deserved to be included. The struggle of female gamers surrounds the nature to which they currently feel alienated and accepted by male gamers, the barriers they experience in joining guilds dominated by men, and their attempts to 'break into' the competitive gaming circles also dominated by male gamers (Kaye and Pennington, 2016). This tension is a specific manifestation of a general

discursive struggle between social exclusion and social inclusion that many scholars have observed in the broader development context (Papa, Singhal, and Papa, 2006). The following excerpt from Zelle speaks about the increase in female gamers:

> Males need to stop thinking they are the only gender that plays games...Nowadays 70% of the females I meet play games.

The following excerpt from Darrius is typical of the response that male gamers posted. They tended to question the expertise of those who published statistics or surveys about the increase in female gamers, thus challenging their right to expression. A number of surveys that spoke about the changing gaming landscape and the growing female consumer base were dismissed for not understanding 'hardcore' gamers.

> Oh this again. The stats in question were taken from a survey using a mere 2000 people. Added Candy Crush saga and Farmville players were also counted in. Stats and articles like these should be taken with a grain of salt.

They challenged the identity of female gamers by making distinctions between casual gamers and 'hardcore' or 'proper' gamers. They questioned whether the term gamer could be applied to anybody that plays any game compared to 'gamers' as in the type that own high-end personal computers (PC), accessories, subscriptions, and high-speed internet access. They ignored the fact that in a democratic, post-apartheid South Africa, such access points to the persisting race and gender advantage that white males have historically had over other social groups. They distinguished between real gamers and pretend 'wannabe' gamers. They also distinguished tabletop gamers from 'real' video gamers, gamers that played popular games on their smart phones, simple games such as "Candy Crush" from "hardcore" much more complex online games that centre around military combat, historically a male-oriented interest. Even though women comprise nearly half of many online games, they are still viewed as trespassers. The next excerpt speaks to the taunting women gamers face and the negative perspective that male gamers have about the inclusion of female gamers. Note the frequent use of pejorative messages concerning gender. Derogatory terms and insults paint women gamers in a

pejorative light and frame any discussion of equality negatively. Instead of a form of entertainment, Zelle experiences gaming relations with male gamers as a site of dominance and power.

> A lot of guys will make comments like…"go back to where you belong…the kitchen"…"make me a sandwich".. "oh your're female prolly so bad at this game"…"you're female...why should I listen to you...you don't know what you're doing"...

Not only are 'real' female gamers rare but girls who are gamers are seen to be different from the typical girl. Such rhetoric mirrors the findings of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995), who found that the male construction of femininity is a direct contrast to masculine strengths. A 'gamer girl' therefore suggests a "tomboy" style of femaleness. Thus, a problem for female gamers is the "unfeminine" image the label of gamer implies.

This subtheme highlights the conflict some female gamers had between being a gamer and being feminine. They clearly distinguished between their identities as a woman and as a gamer. One of the female activists wrote:

> Try your best and improve your skill and in the end, it won't matter what gender you are, you're just a gamer.

Some female gamers believe that male gamers will accept them if they accept the masculine meanings of gaming. They define gaming excellence in individualistic and competitive terms, as opposed to group and altruistic terms that characterises the cooperative skills required in many online games. While speaking against male gamer oppression, this activist appropriates the voice of patriarchal authority, serving only to assimilate masculine values, thus validating masculinity in gaming. Women are expected to perform their gender as a male gamer as opposed to androgynous, transgender or genderless identities. Another subtheme was about the alternative ways of coping with feeling socially excluded. Some female gamers learn what behaviours and appearances are privileged, and hegemonic femininity is "performed" to gain social acceptance and status. For example, female gamers would sometimes use their attractiveness or sexuality to garner support from male gamers. Others resorted to

some form of withdrawal to avoid confrontation. Some female gamers use disparaging humour as a form of coping. But not all female gamers simply acquiesced. Another tactic that women use to gain acceptance is to hide their gender online. Male gamers usually assume that a player is male and thus players will talk to each other as though all players involved are males. Some women will intentionally allow this assumption to continue, especially if there is no voice chat required.

To cope with being excluded and yet experience a level of social connectedness, some female gamers resorted to creating all female teams to elevate themselves from their imposed subordinated position and gain some respect and acceptance.

> I created an all female League of Legends team..and I train with them everyday to prove that females can
> play games and be good at it..I want to break this whole gender thing.

The success and impact of all-female teams bodes well for women in the South African gaming community. All-female South African teams can participate in the Valkyrie Challenge, an all-female CSGO (Counter-Strike Global Offensive) league, sponsored by pro-gaming authority, Mettlestate. The Valkyrie Challenge is one of the few gaming leagues in South Africa that has a six-figure prize pool and has the second highest earning potential in the South African leagues. Currently, seven to nine teams participate in the Valkyrie Challenge, which means there are about 70 females competing. An all-female South African team recently gained enough success locally that they were able to compete in China at the World Electronic Sports Games finals for CSGO in 2018.

Discursive Struggle #4: Exclusion to employment networks in the gaming industry

This last struggle surrounds the discourse about the lack of diversity of women and other marginalised groups participation in the South Africa's growing gaming industry. Many white male gamers are reluctant to acknowledge that their offline privileges provides them with significant social and economic advantages which also has negative implications for other marginalised groups' awareness, willingness and ability to participate in the industry. Instead, the majority of white male gamers

argued that a focus on diversity, especially gender and racially-based employment equity, unfairly strips them of their social and economic rights and privileges.

They position the local gaming industry as an equitable utopia governed by laws of the market and believe that any attempts to regulate diversity means that they will continue to lose the power they earned, deserve and are entitled to, given their individual skills and entrepreneurial savvy. They ignore historical facts of colonialism and apartheid. The reality is that the gaming industry in a developing country like South Africa is firmly embedded within everyday ideologies of race and gender, where the requisite economic and social capital is still heavily divided by race and gender. The following excerpt from Scott is typical of the flawed ways in which white male gamers view inequality in the gaming industry. Scott attempts to gain legitimacy by distorting the historical basis for the high levels of social inequality in South Africa as being a product of exclusive white privilege and control, instead positioning the instrumental individualism of the white male as the basis for economic success.

> Game development is not an Apartheid era industry. So again what is the point? Are white males not allowed to start businesses? Does industry HAVE to represent the SA demographics. WHY? Maybe people of color or females do not WANT to start gaming companies ..... Starting a business is open to everyone, not white males only. Anybody can do it .... Are we not a free and democratic society and country? This article is the same old same old, ... blame the white male ..... boohoo. This is just racial and keeps on being racial..... and I feel hell on being insulted .... Shame on you ......

The response below suggests a more expansive rather than the contractive discursive practice recorded in the above excerpt. The excerpt below entertains the idea that several positions may explain the lack of diversity in the local gaming industry.

> The fact it consists of 92% white males, means that there are clear barriers to entry into the industry for non-whites and females. That could be the result of the perceived hostility towards females or non-whites in the industry. It could even be attributed to the lack of knowledge that the industry is growing in South Africa.

A female gamer agrees with Owen and disagrees with Scott:

> However, it does not change the fact that there are barriers for non-whites and females in the games industry that does not apply to white males. It doesn't make white males the enemy, it shouldn't mean white males must be penalised for it, nor must they pay for it. It does mean that we should figure out what the barriers are & address it for the females and non-whites who do want to break into the industry.

The response from Owen to Scott shows that more than one discursive possibility may exist to explain why certain groups are being marginalised in South Africa's growing gaming industry. Although Owen and the female gamer create a short-lived aesthetic moment, they find themselves in a less than equal discursive field. Many of the white male gamers remain aligned to the dominant discourse that industries such as gaming are built by individual resourcefulness, sustaining the historical imbalance of power between the discourses that are promoting the myth of individual resourcefulness against the more realistic, suppressed discourses of racial privilege and racially based collusive control. This comment by Danny typifies this privileged view:

> Before I started my own latest successful business, I tried at least 10 times, if not more, and failed ...... Even my currently business underwent many challenges, hardships and sacrifices ... Many ..... I can assure you. And it never stops. Life and business is tough ... get over it.....

Discussion

As depicted in Figure 2, analysing the female gamer activist posts (FGAP) and comments, using a critical relational dialectics framework, provided interesting insights on the gender discursive struggles about social inclusion facing a South African online gaming community. The framework presented in Figure 2 revealed four key discursive struggles male and female gamers confronted as they attempted to negotiate appropriate roles and statuses for each other. These were *dominance versus equality, stereotyping versus diversity, competitiveness versus cooperativeness, and privilege versus empowerment*.
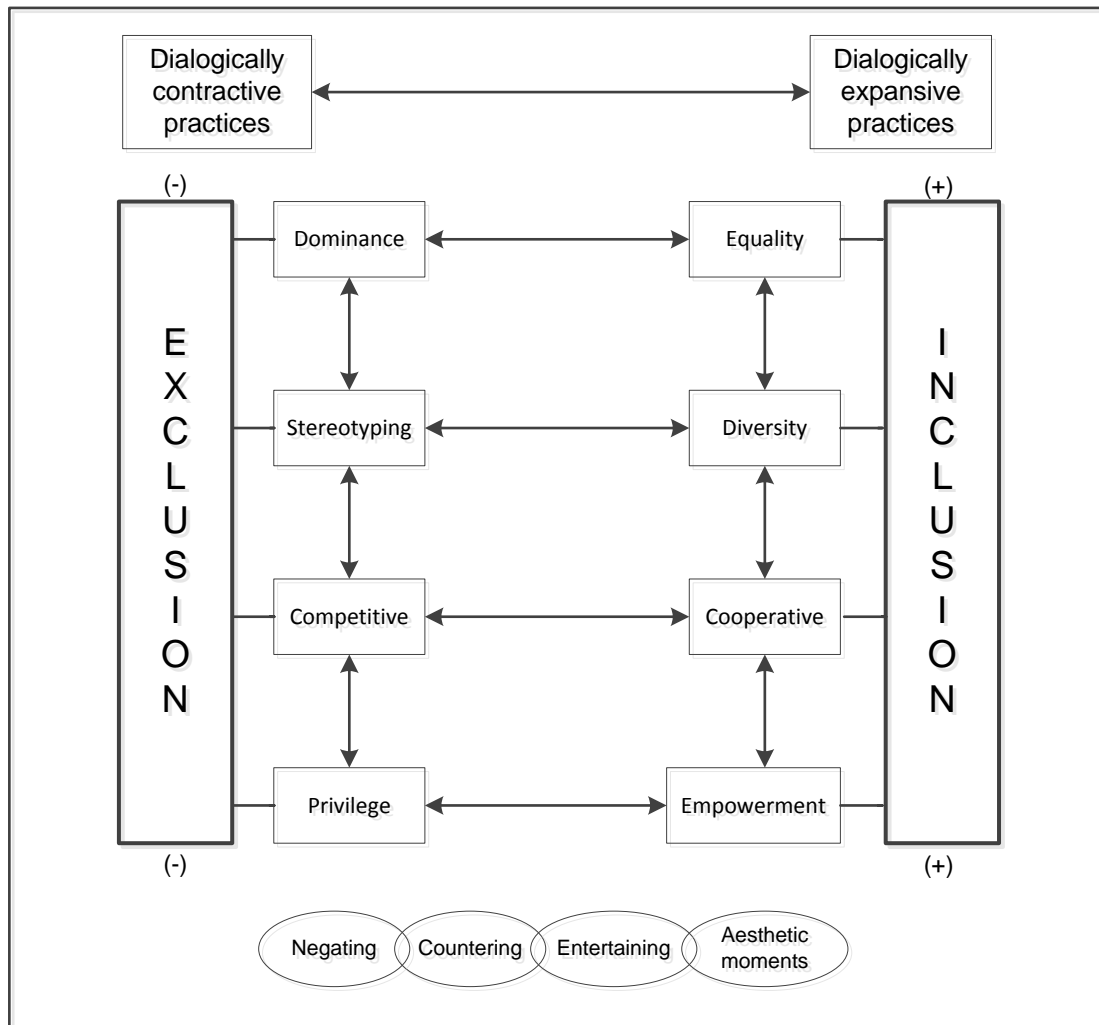
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Figure 2. Gender discursive struggles about social inclusion in an online gaming community

Figure 2 moves beyond the typical discursive struggles faced in everyday personal relationships, proposed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996). RDT scholars have consistently observed the discursive struggles of integration–separation, expression–nonexpression and stability–change in various social settings. We also observed the discursive struggle of expression–nonexpression when online gender sexual harassment led to nonexpression by some female gamers. We observed the discursive struggle of integration-separation as some women struggled for inclusion in competitive gaming circles and participation in the gaming industry. The discursive struggle of stability–change was also observed as some women struggled to create an alternative gaming culture while men resisted the need for change and sought to preserve the status quo. Similar to Martin and Nakayama (1999) who found discursive struggles such as differences–similarities, history–future, and privilege–disadvantage, our discursive

struggles of dominance–equality, stereotyping–diversity, competitiveness–cooperativeness, and privilege–empowerment shown in Figure 2 are also culturally and context specific. Our themes also considered how distal already-spokens – that is, discourses that already circulate in the broader South African culture, influenced these gender discursive struggles.

Prior RDT research assumed that competing discourses in gender relations are equally legitimate. Methodologically, this study contributes by applying of RDT 2.0's qualitative dialogic approach in a more critical fashion to study gender relations in an online gaming community. Our study moves beyond Baxter and Bhaktin, by emphasising gender and social exclusion, topics that are not explicitly explored by these scholars. Our study also went beyond prior RDT research that merely identified competing discourses, by paying more attention to the power asymmetries and privilege that feature in gender discursive struggles (Deetz, 1992). The examination of gender relations, power asymmetry, and dominant ideologies in the gaming context was a central concern in our study. In the gaming context we investigated, we found that masculine discourses were generally centered (centripetal) and despite the discursive work by feminist gaming activists and their supporters, feminist discourses remained largely marginalised (centrifugal). Therefore, the posts we analysed were markedly different in their meaning. Feminist activists and their few supporters spoke out against the harassment of women gamers, the hypersexualisation of female characters, the exclusion of female gamers from competitive gaming, and the collusive control of the gaming industry by white males. These attempts to subvert the heteronormative power structures in a digital space dominated by a white male majority, was largely a failure. Similar to Salter and Blodgett (2012), the heteronormatively dominant masculine gaming culture continually enforced and elevated their position, while the position of women were often relegated to the fringes.

However, the view of dominance and other discursive struggles found in this study are not monological or dualistic, but dialogical or dialectical in nature. Our study differs from Salter and Blodgett (2012) noted earlier, who found that male players used the hypermasculine discourse to essentialise female players. From a dualistic perspective, a concept such as dominance is always in

polarity with equality, but we found that there are also contradictions about the meanings of dominance not accounted for in existing monological or dualistic approaches to social inclusion. For example, while some female gamers may perceive a male gamer to be sincere in tackling issues about sexism and equality, other gamers may view the same male gamer as being a "white knight". Our dialectic perspective that focuses on the multiplicity and diversity of meaning or perspectives taken here go beyond the conventional static or binary views of dominance that are in search of a shared meaning. In contrast, the meanings of dominance and equality and other polarities shown in Figure 2, are a dialectical process that occurs through the dynamic interplay with their opposite. Our study is consistent with the work of van Zoonen (2002) noted earlier, who rejects a binary system of gender. It joins a few critical gender scholars in IS in questioning the binary conception of gender and social inclusion that dominates existing scholarship (Trauth and Howcroft, 2006; Howcroft and Trauth, 2008; Trauth, 2013). In their struggle against the dominant gender discourse, female gamers are surrounded by multiple, incompatible social and cultural meanings as they attempt to negotiate new constructions of gender. This process of reconstructing gender engages gamers in encounters with contradictory and opposing viewpoints, processes that are dialectical in nature. A dialectical perspective of gender highlights the multivocal cultural discourses appropriated by men and women as they continually resist and renegotiate gender constructions in the postmodern world.

The study challenges most IS research on social inclusion where the existence of privilege is absent in understanding a groups' struggle. This treatment of social inclusion that ignores privilege has practical implications, as the privileged are unlikely to acknowledge their role in subordinating the socially excluded. It also reinforces notions that the excluded are "poor" or "deviant". From a theoretical perspective, closing the gaps in current social inclusion work in IS by providing a comprehensive understanding of social inclusion is only possible if scholars critically interrogate the privilege concept and researchers understand those who are benefitting the most from present social exclusions (Pease, 2013; Cushman and McLean, 2008). The present study advances Schmitz and Kazyak's (2016) findings about privilege on men's rights activist (MRA) group's posts on the Internet. The examination of FGAP posts corresponds to their findings that white males tend to

protest against being labelled as privileged. Many white males tend to view their relatively easy access to the gaming industry as being a socially neutral process. A plausible explanation lies in the near hegemony white males have achieved in the South African gaming context. Therefore, when their dominance is threatened, the majority of white male gamers tend to obscure the social processes that subordinated and continue to subordinate women and other marginalised groups, to protect their interests. It is generally important for the self-presentation of dominant groups that they not to see themselves as denying marginalised groups access to the gaming industry via exclusionary processes (van Dijk, 2004). It is also important for dominant groups to claim that their advantage is normative – based on utilitarian individualism (van Dijk, 2004). Analysis of the posts also shows that the majority of white males view negative-others as being directly responsible for the disadvantages they face, such as the social exclusion from the gaming industry. Despite being short-lived, there was an aesthetic moment during one of these discursive struggles, where a male and female gamer attempted to reconstruct the meaning of privilege in a profound way to promote social inclusion and a fairer and more democratic society. These gamers give us hope that we will be able to improve the state of social inclusion in online gaming.

The discursive struggles identified in our South African gaming community are not unique and are transferable to many gaming communities across the globe. Similar issues can be found in a variety of blogs and forums on the Internet. One such forum is Girl Gamer on Reddit, which boasts a membership of over seventy-six thousand members. The forum provides members with a 'discord channel' where engagement about gender struggles in gaming occur. The Gamer Girl sub-reddit forum posts also show similar discursive struggles to those identified in the paper and provide a place for females to discuss these issues with other females worldwide.

This study has important practical implications. Currently there are many spheres where women face social exclusion. We believe that the struggle for gender equity in online gaming is a useful domain for the overall empowerment of women. The online gaming community, unlike physical sports, and like most social communities, is one where masculine attributes, such as physicality, have very little

impact on success levels. This makes the online gaming community an ideal domain for social inclusion, as the common patriarchal rationale, such as the physical prowess of men, cannot be offered as a reason to justify social exclusion in this domain. The online gaming community is a very large and growing community made up of people who are part of many other communities. If a woman could gain social inclusion in the gaming environment, this could give her the confidence needed to address social inclusion in her profession. If a male gamer could acknowledge that female gamers are deserving of social inclusion in the online gaming community, there is a better chance that he could acknowledge the possibility of social inclusion of females in other male-dominated communities.

Focusing on democratic imperatives, governments have more work to do to improve gender equality in broader society to change the discursive and non-discursive practices pertaining to the social exclusion of women. In terms of specific actions in the gaming industry, it may mean that there is some regulation by the state to ensure that local gaming companies employ marginalised groups to improve their representation in the industry, and that marginalised groups are given the necessary support to start up gaming companies (Ganesh and Zoller, 2012). The state should also find ways of encouraging gender equitable content in gaming. Enlightened game designers working in the gaming industry should reinforce accurate and positive stereotypes to attract the fast growing female gamer population into the online gaming community and to develop a less chauvinistic and more diversely representative gaming community. Ultimately, in organising counter power to challenge the content of current gaming designs and the sexist and exclusionary practices of many male gamers, more enlightened female and male gamers should be mobilised to act in solidarity with women gamer activists to improve social inclusion in gaming.

The study contributes to scholarly conversations about social inclusion in the wider online community literature. More specifically, it offers a critical relational dialectics approach to analyse and understand the discursive struggles facing women and other excluded social groups in other digital spaces. Finally, despite this study's unique contributions to understanding the various gender

discursive struggles that gamers can face online, its dialectical as opposed to an essentialist or binary perspective of gender, and its making visible and interrogating the concept of privilege as it relates to social inclusion, it is not without limitations. One limitation of the study is that it only analysed a single online gaming community that was publicly available. While it is plausible that gamers may experience similar discursive struggles about social inclusion in other gaming communities, it is also possible that different discursive struggles about social inclusion peculiar to other community contexts also exist. To develop a better understanding of social inclusion in gaming, researchers should continue to explore the gender discursive struggles confronting different types of online gaming communities, and perhaps examine how these struggles may be changing over time. Another limitation of the current study is its focus on gender relations while ignoring the discursive struggles facing relational divisions of race and ethnicity, social class, disability, religion, sexual orientation and other social divisions in the online gaming environment. What are the discursive struggles facing marginalised race groups, queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender players in online gaming communities?

Conclusion

This paper develops and uses a critical relational dialectics approach to understand the discursive struggles about social inclusion present in gamer gender relations. Although researchers are making great strides in understanding the lived experiences of online gamer gender relations, more research of a critical nature is needed to understand social inclusion within these contemporary forms of relating. This study adds to the extant online gaming and IS literature by examining the broader, often prejudicial and exclusionary, relational and cultural discourses that interplay to impede social inclusion among gamers with different gender identities. Online gaming and other technologies have become sites for broader discursive struggles that constitute gender relations in broader society. Since women gamers continue to experience social exclusion in a male dominated online gaming culture, it is important that researchers explore the formative role of traditional, relational and cultural

discourses in the creation, maintenance and change of online gamer gender relations. Future research should also provide insights on how gamers representing the different gender groups are working through these discursive struggles, in order to open up more inclusive and richer democratic discursive possibilities in an increasingly complex social and technology-mediated world.

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