# LADY GAME CLUB: THE POPULAR FEMINIST POLITICS OF WOMEN-IN-GAMES ORGANIZATIONS

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## Abstract

‘Feminism in games’ is a large, dispersed, and networked movement that is happening in online and offline spaces. This research seeks to illuminate how inequities can be reproduced within a feminist community through a close examination of Lady Game Club (LGC), a non-profit organization that teaches women how to make digital games. Drawing on the feminist theories of ‘platform feminism’ (Singh, 2021) and ‘popular feminism’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018), I theorize LGC as a platform for popular feminism in games. This study employs community-engaged ethnographic methods, specifically participant-observation and interviews, to analyse the feminist logics that are built into the structure of LGC and practiced by the women game-makers who are a part of this community.

By examining the feminist politics of LGC, this study demonstrates the limits of popular feminism in creating an inclusive and equitable games industry and challenging systems of oppression. LGC takes a direct representation approach to feminist activism. It is designed to get more (white and middle-class) women into the games industry, but not to change it. As a platform, LGC elevates and amplifies popular feminism’s normative modes of feminist resistance (i.e., ‘women’s individual empowerment’) while obscuring other forms of feminist resistance, such and those based in survival, care, and refusal. The organization structures feminist politics as an individual politics rather than a collective one, foreclosing the possibility for feminist resistances that are based on collective action or thinking about oppression as systemic or 'built in' (Benjamin, 2019). Although LGC is enmeshed in and reinforces the hegemonic systems of patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy, it also creates an opening in the public’s imagination for a more equitable game industry.

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# Preface

## Origin Story

My entry into the world of women-in-games community building and feminist advocacy work started with my desire to learn how to make a video game. In early 2011, I was managing an after-school program that taught middle-school aged kids how to make games using Game Maker, a free DIY game making program used by hobbyists and professionals alike). My role was to organize and oversee the logistical aspects of the program, while the teaching was done by the undergraduate student instructors. Sometimes, a kid would call me over to ask a question about Game Maker, and I would experience a hot flash of embarrassment when admitting that I couldn't help and redirected them to one of the young male instructors. I felt that my lack of Game Maker knowledge and skills made me a poor role model for the few girls who were in the program, who I sensed approached me instead of the male instructors *because* I was a woman. I was starting my PhD program that fall, and I intended to research how game making might encourage girls to become interested in STEM fields. This experience of repeatedly saying "I don't know" made it very clear to me that if I was going to pursue girls and game development as my dissertation research topic, it would be wise to acquire some game making skills myself.

In July 2011, I was forwarded an email by a colleague to see if I was interested in reviewing a women-only game making program that was being organized by the HES. The proposed program was similar in structure to the after-school game making programs I was running for kids, but it was intended to help adult women with no programming knowledge make a game in 6 weeks. I not only agreed to review the program, but I also asked the organizers if I could participate in the program alongside the other women so I could also learn how to make

my own game using Game Maker In exchange for a spot, I would conduct a small-scale study on the ability of a community non-profit organization to get more women into games (Fisher & Harvey, 2013).[1] The organizers agreed, and I was now a participant of the Diversity in Games Initiative (DGI).

DGI was the first women in games program in Toronto and was the catalyst that led to the creation of the women-in-games organization Lady Game Club (LGC). In turn, DGI and LGC served as models for another women-in-games initiative: Pixelles, which is based in Montreal.

For the last thirteen years, I have been actively involved in the women-in-games community in Toronto and Montreal. In addition to serving in official leadership roles for multiple organizations (e.g., Director, Treasurer, etc.), I have also served as an "embedded researcher" for these communities (a role that I discuss in detail in Chapter 4). My role as an embedded researcher carries the responsibility to bear witness, listen, and document the feminist stories told to me by members of these communities. I am deeply invested in documenting the history of women-in-games community development in Canada, which is reflected in this dissertation.

**Be Right Back**

I started interviewing participants for this dissertation research in 2014. That was also the year when the subject of "women in technology fields" became part of a national dialogue, in no small part due to Gamergate, an explosive, online harassment campaign against women in games

[1] In between 2011 and 2014, I collaborated with Alison Harvey on research about the larger 'women-in-games' community. Many aspects of our research have already been published (Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Harvey & Fisher, 2013, 2015, 2016), and I will be referencing this throughout this dissertation. In this dissertation project, I am looking at one organization – Lady Game Club (LGC).

that began in August 2014 and would continue for several years. Gamergate hit close to home – it was devastating to witness the online harassment of peers and friends, and even more terrifying to experience it firsthand. It was especially frustrating to feel silenced. I was envious of other researchers who were able to do research on Gamergate or the feminism in games movement from a privileged position of "outside observer" and share their work without any risk to their community or personal safety. After two years of trying to write about a feminist games community while simultaneously worrying about putting that information out into this hostile environment, I was overwhelmed, anxious, afraid, and burned out. In 2016, I decided to take a break from this research until I was able to write freely and without worry. I've remained a part of this community, but instead of conducting research, I redirected my energy and efforts towards providing leadership. Eight years later, the dust from Gamergate has settled, and I have returned to finish this work.

This dissertation is extremely personal. My participants are individuals with whom I have come to form strong bonds with. We've shared wins and losses, built communities, and endured harassment together. There have also been fall outs, call outs, and accusations made against each other. For over 10 years I have wrestled with "what to say" and "how to say it," struggling with how to balance my privilege (to be in a position where I get to hear these stories), responsibility (to respect the wishes of the individual who shared their stories with me), and duty (to create knowledge using these stories) as a researcher, friend, and community member. I go around in circles and end up back where I started – safety; for myself, my friends, my community. Therefore, rather than focus on the feminist practices of the individuals themselves, this study focuses on the organization. In doing so, I hope I can capture what it was like to participate in the

early years of LGC in a way that honours those who had a part in building that community and who shared their stories with me.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the early 2010s 'women and tech' was having a moment. After 30+ years of silence, the lack of women working in technology fields was suddenly thrown into the spotlight. It was imperative to "get more girls and women into tech," and what followed was an explosion of resources for girls and women to use to empower themselves so they could pursue a career in this field. While there was a plethora of programs and organizations dedicated to helping girls learn how to code or make video games, there was a lack of programs specifically geared towards supporting young adult women in their 20s and 30s who wanted to make games and work in the games industry.

The options and opportunities for young women to learn how to make games were limited. They could either enroll in a prohibitively expensive post-secondary game design program at a private career college,[2] teach themselves through online tutorials posted on web forums or YouTube, or, if they lived in an area with a sizable enough creative media arts industry, they could attend events and workshops that were offered by local professional associations or community organizations. At this time, the games industry was (and still is) notoriously sexist, and for many women, being in a "games space" often meant being subjected to unwanted sexual attention or advances, having their interests in games ridiculed or dismissed, and other discriminatory (and sometimes, hostile) behaviours.

Despite the recent opening up of games culture to new audiences (brought about by, among other things, the explosion of "casual games" that could be played on social media platforms and mobile phones and the Nintendo's new marketing strategy to sell the Wii as a

[2] Unlike today, very few publicly funded post-secondary institutions offered game design programs in the early 2010s.

console for the whole family) the games industry was still very much a boys' club, with a workforce that was predominantly young, white, heterosexual and male. Young women who were interested in learning how to make games needed spaces where they could receive support without having to deal with the challenges and barriers they experienced as women. It's under these conditions that the Toronto-based organization Lady Game Club (LGC) came to be.[3]

LGC was a community organization where game makers who identified as women or other marginalized genders could learn how to make games through workshops, incubator programs, events, and other community activities. What set LGC apart from other women-in-games groups was its explicitly feminist mission to change the industry. It was a space where feminist activism and advocacy were openly discussed and an important part of members' creative practice. LGC was (and still is) an important learning space and support system for the many women game makers who are a part of the community. It was also a space where feminist beliefs clashed, volunteers burned out quickly, and inequalities were quietly reproduced in a space that was supposed to fight against them.

**The Research Problem**

Like many other women-focused games organizations and initiatives, LGC positions itself as critical of the status quo and engaged in the fight against the sexism and misogyny that is intrinsic to the games industry. But even feminist communities are enmeshed in the hegemonic systems they are trying to dismantle. This research seeks to better understand how inequities can be reproduced within a feminist women-in-games community.

[3] In this study, I am looking at Lady Game Club (LGC) in its early years of community development between 2012 – 2015. The organization still exists, however its mission, programming, operations, and governance structure look significantly different than from a decade ago.

In its mission statement, LGC describes itself as a platform that has the potential to "make feminism in games accessible to the broader public" (LGC, 2014, n.p.). As I will argue in this dissertation, LGC is aligned with the tenets of "popular feminism" (Banet-Weiser, 2018), which was flourishing during the early to mid-2010s. The goal of popular feminism is to make feminism accessible and visible. Within spaces of popular feminism, feminisms that are focused on increasing representation and the inclusion of more women in places where they are marginalized (like the tech sector) come to dominate, while feminisms that are critical of structural oppression (and advocate for the dismantlement of oppressive systems) are obscured. LGC manages to hold space for the different types of feminist discourses and beliefs that are held by its members, but not all feminisms (and feminists) manage to rise up onto the LGC platform to become visible and accessible.

Taking seriously LGC's description and notion of itself as a platform, I draw on Rianka Singh's (2018, 2021) theory of platform feminism (where the platform structures the political and social) and Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of popular feminism (where multiple, different feminisms are competing for dominance and visibility) to theorize LGC as a platform for feminism in games. Popular feminism and platform feminism are complimentary theories that are both concerned with how certain feminisms come to be elevated and amplified, and the implications of this for contemporary feminist political movements. By theorizing LGC as a platform with its own set of logics, I ask the following three research questions:

1. What are the feminist logics of LGC and how do they structure the political and the social?

2. What feminisms are the most visible and what feminisms are obscured on the LGC platform?
3. What registers as feminist resistance at LGC?

By answering these questions, this research seeks to illuminate the popular understandings of feminist activism in a grassroots, women-in-games community organization, and the limits of LGC's popular feminism in creating an inclusive and equitable games industry and challenging systems of oppression.

**Chapter Overview**

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter 2, I explore the historical and cultural contexts of young women's participation in media production, feminist activism and the games industry. Drawing on scholarly work in the fields of Girls Studies, Feminist Studies, and Game Studies, I review girls and young women's feminist activism in media spaces, the feminist movement during the 2000s-2010s, and examples of popular feminism (and popular misogyny) in North American games culture and industry. In Chapter 3, I provide details on the LGC community by delving into the background history and feminist mission of the organization before introducing the concept of platform feminism (Singh, 2021) to theorize LGC as a platform for feminism in games.

In Chapter 4, I outline my overall framework of feminist community-engaged research and the two ethnographic methodologies I draw upon to inform my "Feminist Embedded Ethnography" research methodology. Following the principles of critical and reflexive ethnography, I explicate the various subject positions that I occupy (as a mixed-race cis-gendered

woman, as a community member, as organizer, as researcher, as target of harassment, as witness of harassment, as feminist, etc.) and the 'embedded researcher' role that reflects how I was positioned by the community under study. I discuss the key features of feminist embedded ethnography before describing the methods employed for data collection and analysis.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I analyse the structure of LGC and the multiple feminist discourses circulating within LGC to show how feminisms that emphasize women's individual empowerment were elevated and amplified while feminisms that were more critical of systems of oppression (e.g., white supremacy, patriarchy capitalism) were less supported. Using an intersectional feminist lens, I highlight the feminist tensions experienced by the Storytellers[4] to show how the structural design of LGC reinforces the dominant social hierarchies that work to keep marginalized groups out of games and tech spaces. In Chapter 7, I summarize my research findings, discuss the limits of LGC's "platform power" (Singh, 2021) for creating an inclusive and equitable games industry and the potential of the "ambivalent spaces" of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) for supporting a collective feminist politics, and future directions for feminist intersectional research on marginalized communities in games.

**Contributions of the Study to the Field of Feminist Game Studies**

The core of my study is an examination of how community-based women-in-games organizations can simultaeneously create space for, and foreclose the possibility of, feminist politics. It illustrates the messiness and complexities of feminist communities, and how they are enmeshed with, uphold, and challenge hegemonic systems of oppression (such as patriarchy, capitalism, racism, heteronormativity).

[4] I refer to the women I interviewed in this study as Storytellers. This choice is explained more in Chapter 4.

My research is situated within the field of feminist game studies. Feminist game studies scholars analyze the larger games industry for its structures and practices, as well as the field of game studies itself, which – knowingly or not – often marginalizes games or game content that is deemed as "feminized" and therefore "not worthy" of sustained attention (Consalvo, 2019). Existing scholarship that examines feminist activism in games is primarily focused on analyzing publicly available texts (websites, forums, social media posts, games etc.). As such, insights about the inner workings of feminist organizations are typically limited to what can be gleaned from public or promotional texts, and do not include the voices and perspectives of those who are participating in the community under study. While there is a growing body of feminist scholarship that uses community-engaged research methodologies to explore how marginalized individuals build communities in games spaces, these studies are focused on examining the practices and communities of game players (see Gray 2014, 2018), not game makers. This dissertation project seeks to fill this gap by providing an in-depth look at an explicitly feminist women-in-games organization from the perspectives of its members. It is also the first study within the field of game studies that uses platform feminism as a conceptual framework to examine a feminist community.

Community-based interventions like LGC play an important role in helping to diversify the games industry, yet these initiatives remain woefully understudied (Voorhees, McLaren, Oropeza, Whitson, Bird, and Gray, 2024). While there is ample research within the field of game studies that examines networked feminist activism in games (for example: Braithwaite, 2016; Bezio, 2018; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017) there is only a small body of work, including scholarship that I have contributed to in the past, that analyses feminist action

taking place within  women-in-games organizations in offline contexts[5] (see Boudreau, 2022; Chung, Harvey & Fisher, 2023; Fisher & Harvey, 2013, 2023; Harvey & Fisher, 2013, 2015, 2016; Schoemann, 2021). This study answers the call made by Voorhees et. al. (2024) to examine and interrogate community-based initiatives, their relationships with industry, and to what extent they challenge or reproduce the imperative to assimilate marginalized people to the norms of androgyny and white supremacy.

My study also offers a new approach for conducting critical ethnographic inquiry when the researcher is already a part of the community and seen as a community member first and a researcher second. I call this methodology "feminist embedded ethnography." Feminist embedded ethnography challenges and disrupts the conceptual norms of rational, distanced, and objective scholarly knowledge production and the conventional norms of ethnographic research. By analysing the experiences of feminist game makers through the intimate perspective that "embedding" provides, this study offers a fragmented, narrow slice of what feminist community building and activism looked like at a particular time and place.

Although LGC is a small node in the larger feminism in games network, it is connected to and representative of the broader issues at stake within feminism and techno-capitalism during the EDI era of the games industry. The findings of this research provides scholarly audiences with an understanding of the issues facing feminist women-in-games communities that are grounded in the lived experiences of those who were building and participating in these spaces, including the researcher.

[5] As opposed to feminist action that is taking place in digital spaces (e.g., social media movements, online communities).

## Chapter 2: Context & Literature Review

The emergence of feminist women-in-games organizations in the early 2010s reflects the major cultural shifts happening both within feminism and the tech industry at this historical moment. Silicon Valley had risen to mainstream importance, public awareness of the tech industry's lack of women and ingrained sexism was growing, and feminism was experiencing an exceptional resurgence in both visibility and popularity. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the historical context for understanding young women's participation in feminist activism and game making in the early to mid 2010s, in what I will refer to as the games industry's "EDI era" going forward.[6] What were the larger cultural forces at play that would motivate young women to join and participate in a feminist women-in-games organization? In this chapter, I explore scholarly work that examines girls and young women's feminist activism in media spaces, the feminist movement in the 2000s-2010s, and the different ways in which popular feminism (and popular misogyny) circulates within the North American tech industry.

I begin with a brief overview of young women's political activism in media spaces and the use of games for feminist activism. The body of research that examines feminist activism as practiced by adult women game makers is very small,[7] and so I expand the horizons of this

[6] The EDI era of the games can be defined by the distinct technological, cultural, and social changes that were occurring in games and tech cultures in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The games industry, which up to this point had remained largely unchanged for the last 30 years, was now undergoing massive changes as the games industry expanded to sell games to new markets beyond the young, white male gamer. This opening up of games culture to new audiences resulted in a "culture war" (Alexander, 2015; Goldberg & Larson, 2015) between the progressive values of a "new gaming public" (Salter & Blodgett, 2010), who critiqued the hegemonic cultural norms and hierarchies of games culture (and also called for the creation of a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive games industry), and disenfranchised "hardcore gamers" who, up to this point, had benefitted from the white, male, and heteronormative supremacies that were entrenched within the games industry. The EDI era spans the years before, during, and after Gamergate, a significant event of this moment in time that demonstrates the "response" of popular misogyny to popular feminism's "call" to get more women into tech (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

[7] Some notable exceptions include Boudreau, 2022; Fullerton, Fron, Pearce, Morie, 2008; Poremba, 2009; Stone, 2014; Westecott, Epstein, Leitch, 2013; Schoemann, 2021, and my own collaborative research work (Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Fisher & Stone, 2016; Harvey & Fisher, 2013, 2015, 2016).

literature review by drawing on research from the field of Girls Studies. Girls Studies focuses on gender and age in the context of media, technology, culture, and shares a close connection to media studies, therefore providing a rich research landscape to explore girls' use of media for creative expression and feminist activism: In what ways were young women participating in activism? How did they talk about their feminist activism in these media spaces? How did they engage in media production and game making in their activism?

The young women I interview in this study were at an age where they were transitioning from being a youth to becoming an adult. Their early experiences with media production throughout their childhood and teenage years (1990s-2000s) were foundational to their experiences as young women who were just starting their careers during the "learn to code" women's empowerment initiatives in the 2010s. They are in a moment of liminal space between girlhood and adulthood, and so I draw on Girls Studies to examine the role of gender and age in the context of 'media practices as a form of activism.' Drawing on scholarly work in this field, I trace the same "path to feminism" that the Storytellers talk about during their interviews (how they became interested in making games and how they understood feminism at different parts of their lives) and connect it to the larger cultural context of feminism that was happening during the EDI era.

Following this, I provide an overview of the 'post Girl-Power' feminisms that emerged during the 2000s-2010s. This was the era of postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007), of feminism's deep entwinement with neoliberalism (Rottenberg, 2014), and the spectacular emergence of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Popular feminism is a contemporary feminism that is intertwined with post- and neoliberal feminisms and has a dynamic and networked connection with popular misogyny. Popular feminism provides a useful framework to explore how scholars

have examined feminism within the games/tech industry, such as the "girls that code" empowerment movement (the entry point for girls and women into games/tech culture), documenting the sexist conditions of games industry and culture, and the emerging backlash of popular misogyny against efforts to create a more inclusive games industry for women and other marginalized game makers.

## Girls, Feminist Activism, and Media Production

### *Girls & Activism*

There is a range of scholarly work that examines the multi-faceted dimensions of girls' activism, from organizing and creating online communities (Keller, 2012), to identity formation (Brown, 2008) and their political engagement with specific issues (Taft, 2017). Girls actively participate in a variety of social movements (Taft, 2011, 2017) as well as feminist activity that is specifically focused on women's rights and gender equality (Brown, 2008; Ringrose, 2013). Feminist activism creates an individual awareness of the world, where girls and women can use their work as education for themselves and others on social issues that relate to their oppression (Baily, Wang & Scotto-Lavino, 2020; Keller 2012) and claim political authority to speak about issues that affect them (Taft 2011, 2017; Brown, 2008; Kim & Ringrose, 2018).

Girls' experiences with activism and the construction of activist identities can happen through engagement with programs, initiatives, or organizations (Ringrose, 2013). But young people's activism is not necessarily confined to participation through or within a specific program or organization. Because of the adult-centric approach taken by mainstream feminism, girls have historically turned to subcultures to express alternative gender politics (Harris, 2008; Kearney, 2006; McRobbie, 1994). While first and second wave feminism is associated with

political movements, third wave feminism transformed what activism looks like, where participation in subcultures could be seen as an act of resistance for young people, and media production is an important site where this resistance can occur (Harris, 2008). In *Girls Make Media,* Kearney (2006) positions girl media producers as disruptive force, and "we do well to consider the changes to popular culture and dominant society their presence is provoking" (p.13). Girls' media production is an important site where girls are enacting political agency and blurring the lines between producing and consuming media culture (Harris, 2010; Jenson, Dahya, & Fisher, 2014; Kearney, 2006; Keller, 2012; Terzopoulos, 2022).

### *Telling stories and creating communities*

Girls are active producers of culture through media production, and that cultural work has the potential to have political effect. Media production empowers young people to use their voice, and initiatives that teach girls media production skills often center around social justice or community-based projects (Brown, 2008). A frequently researched form of feminist activism and media production is girls' creation of storytelling videos to show what is happening in their lives (everyday injustices), with intention to create awareness about problem, educate a wider audience, and incite change (Fisher & Jenson, 2017; Jenson, Dahya, Fisher, 2014; Terzopoulos, 2022).

In addition to locally run programs, girls use online and social media platforms to connect with and participate in activist communities as members, creators, contributors, and leaders (Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012). In her study on young feminist bloggers, Keller (2012) demonstrates how girls' engagement in online media production provides them with opportunities to embrace new understandings of community, activism, and feminism. Keller

(2012) argues that online media production reframes what it means to participate in feminist politics, and activism through media production can meet young girls' needs as contemporary young feminists with a neoliberal cultural context.

Scholarly work by Brandi Bell (2007), Anita Harris (2008), Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and Claudia Mitchell (2004), and Amanda Lenhardt and Mary Madden (2005) have shown how, historically, girls, more so than boys, gravitate towards online social and political engagement due to the appeal of online spaces as an unregulated but public space that is outside of adult intervention that allows for connection with peers and expression of personal interests. Like blogs and videos, videogames are also a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), [8] and function as a type of media production subculture as described above by Harris (2008) and Keller (2012). Video game culture provides a non-regulated and youthful space in which girls and young women can participate in as players, (Cunningham, 2020), makers (Denner & Campe, 2008), spectators (Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2009), and streamers (Tran, 2022). Games as a participatory culture and space can offer girls more political agency as cultural producers than other, more traditional spaces of political activity. Similarly, making games holds possibility of what Keller (2012) calls an "agential staking out of their own feminist activism" (p.11). Games are a media space where girls can reframe feminist activism according to their own lived experiences. Like the production of "storytelling videos" mentioned above, girls and women make games to mark out political issues and ideas that are important to them (Fisher & Jenson, 2017) to express the personal (Anthropy, 2012; Quinn, 2017), and to translate feminist ideas and theories into a playable medium (Poremba, 2008; Schoemann, 2021; Stone, 2018; Westecott, Epstein, & Leitch, 2013).

[8] Participatory culture is defined as a media interaction marked by both productive and consumptive practices – (Jenkins, 2006).

## Feminism during the EDI Era – From "Girl Power" to "Empowered"

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to offer a comprehensive discussion of young women's pathways to feminism, this section provides an overview of the different influential feminism narratives of the late 1990s to 2010s. I begin with a brief synopsis of the "girl power" feminism of the 1990s/2000s before delving into the postfeminist, neoliberal, and popular feminisms of the 2000/2010s that heavily informed the EDI era.

### *Girl Power*

From the mid-1990s to early 2000s, "girl power" was a culturally dominant discourse. Girl power is defined by Zaslow (2009) as "a burgeoning consumer product selling feminism through internal strength, packaged as self-esteem and challenging girls "and women alike to discover their confidence and align as postfeminist cultural citizens" (p. 159). It's messaging - that girls and women are powerful, can do anything, and by anyone - was significant in shaping girls' popular media culture and girls' interpretations of it (Hains, 2012). Although the girl power cultural phenomenon offered contradictory gendered messages (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009; Zaslow, 2009), and the discourses of girl power were constraining to girls and offered limited acceptable identity positions for girls to embody, it did also offer a pathway to feminism (Hains, 2012; Taft, 2004). As a very powerful marketing tool and branding of girlhood (Klein, 2000), the girl power discourse was steeped in a postfeminist narrative of women and girls' successes, and this narrative worked to render gendered and sexual inequalities invisible (McRobbie, 2009).

### *Postfeminism and Neoliberalism*

Postfeminism was the guiding feminist sensibility of the 2000s (Gill, 2007). Postfeminism captures the contradictions, complexities and tensions emerging from simultaneous endorsements and repudiations of feminism The postfeminist ideal positions women as autonomous agents who are now emancipated from patriarchal restrictions. A postfeminist sensibility and political discourse dismisses sexism as an on-going feature of contemporary life in the West (Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2004). With sexism no longer a barrier, women are expected to take responsibility for finding their own success through self-development and skills acquisition (Gill, 2007).

In her examination of gender in cultural forms in the post- girl power era, Angela McRobbie (2009) argues that feminism, as a visionary political imaginary, has been "undone" through a powerful and inescapable alliance with neoliberalism. Neoliberalism and a postfeminist sensibility are closely connected in that neoliberalism, and its discourse of individual rights and responsibilities, insists on the individual as a rational, self-reflexive 'agent' constructing a lifelong 'choice' biography (Davies & Bansel, 2007). In the shift to neoliberalism, young women could appear to have everything they want (presented in an array of choice and empowerment), are offered the freedom to consume and to work (with apparent gains in postfeminist freedom and power), and are expected to be economically active, powerful subjects of social change. Gonick, Renold, Ringrose and Weems (2009) make a similar observation as McRobbie (2009), arguing that "the effects of neo-liberal discourses individualize and de-politicize and have enabled postfeminist discourses to thrive, since the individualizing, fragmenting logics work to destabilize collective movements like feminism" (p. 2). Women are now able to make choices, "undoing" the need for any collective, political feminist organization.

McRobbie (2009) refers to this "undoing" of feminism as disarticulation. Here, disarticulation refers to the incorporation and adopt of feminist elements and ideals into political and institutional life:

> Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like "empowerment" and "choice," these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. These new and seemingly modern ideas about women and especially young women are then disseminated more aggressively so as to ensure that new women's movement will not re-emerge (McRobbie, 2009, p.47).

This foreclosing of the possibility of a new women's movement is a crucial dimension of the argument, especially in light of the feminist discourse around women's participation in the tech sector that began to emerge during the EDI era (hooks, 2015).

### *Lean In – Neoliberal Feminism for Women in Tech*

One such example of popular feminist discourse that is particularly relevant to the EDI era is Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 bestselling book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead.* Lauded as a necessary new 'feminist manifesto,' the book attributes the gender gap in corporate leadership to women's reluctance to aggressively pursue career opportunities. Sandberg offers a simplistic description of the contemporary feminist movement based on the notion that gender equality can be achieved within the existing social system. It's women's lack of perseverance that is the problem, not systemic inequality. From this perspective, the structures

of the imperialist, white supremist, capitalist, patriarchy do not need be challenged - [white] women simply need to have the courage to "lean in" (hooks, 2015).

*Lean In* is a manifesto for neoliberal feminism. Neoliberal feminism situates women as individualized, entrepreneurial, and creative subjects who are capable of balancing family and work through effective utilization of resources (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 22). And while neoliberal feminists generally recognize the existence of systemic gender disparities, these are paid minimal attention (Rottenberg, 2014). Instead, the focus is immediately redirected to individual women who should work on themselves (i.e., become "empowered" and "lean in"). Therefore, although the 'gender mainstreaming' messages of post- and neoliberal feminisms assure us that 'empowerment' and 'choice' and 'equality' are possible for women, the representations of women, and the associated ideals to which women are encouraged to aspire to, re-establish and secure masculine hegemony and white supremacy (McRobbie, 2009).

### *Popular Feminism*

In her book *Empowered* (2018), Sarah Banet-Weiser develops a framework for understanding the "new era of gender wars" (p.5), where we are witnessing a drastic increase in visibility of both popular feminism (and popular misogyny) on networked social platforms and media. The logic of popular feminism is a based on postfeminism and neoliberal feminist ideologies (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; Rottenberg, 2014). Popular feminism positions girls and women as neoliberal feminist subjects, charged with the task of becoming "empowered." Rather than directly challenging patriarchal systems, girls and women can gain confidence and competence through the consumption of products.

Popular feminism conforms to neoliberal logic of the entrepreneurial subject, and these messages are circulated through media expressions and practices. This form of popular feminism is not new and indeed shares characteristics to the "girl power" discourses of the late 1990s, especially the commodification of female empowerment (Zaslow, 2009). Furthermore, popular feminism is aligned with neoliberal feminism in that it sees women's vulnerable position as an individualized problem that can be overcome by becoming empowered, confident, and competent. Popular feminism also sees the inclusion of more women in social, economic and political realms as the solution to gender problems. This is what Joan Scott (1991) has identified as the "add women and stir" solution of liberal feminism.

Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that popular feminism (as opposed to academic or other narrowly defined feminisms) is popular in three ways: 1) feminism is circulated on mainstream media platforms like broadcast and social media, which makes it accessible to a popular audience; 2) feminism is espoused and admired by likeminded people, which makes "popularity" a relevant term; 3) in terms of cultural theory, where the popular is a "terrain of struggle, a space where competing demands for power battle it out" (p. 1). Popular feminism is battling it out with popular misogyny, which is popular in the same three ways as popular feminism.

### *Popular Misogyny*

Wherever we find popular feminism, popular misogyny is also present. Popular feminism and popular misogyny are not individual social phenomenon, rather a networked relationship where one cannot exist without the other. They are two movements connected as structural forces. Banet-Weiser (2018) describes what she calls a "response and call" (p. 113) dynamic

between the two, where popular misogyny is a "reactive response to popular feminism" (p. 37), and so as each develops, both are continually and dynamically restructured.

Toxic masculinity is at the heart of popular misogyny. It involves a sense of entitlement in all realms of culture, economy, and social life, and finds validation within a discourse of injury of men by women (and feminists in particular) (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In this context, women's activism is experienced or understood by men's rights groups as a "series of repeated injuries" (p. 62), and in this misogynistic environment, any such rights are cast within a zero-sum framework whereby women's gains (power, jobs, decision-making) are necessarily men's losses. Men are seen as victims of feminism. The communication tactics of popular misogyny directly mirror those taken by popular feminism. Banet-Weiser (2018) uses the metaphor of a "funhouse mirror" (p. 45) to explain one of the most effective political tactics of popular misogyny, which is to distort, deflect, and subvert popular feminist claims of injury so that it becomes men who are represented as true victims, and the solution is men's empowerment at the expense of women.

### *The Economy of Visibility*

The struggle for visibility between popular feminism and popular misogyny occurs through networked nodes linked by webs of signification, which are built around the tropes of injury and capacity (Banet-Weiser, 2018). As networked feminism seeks mutual support and creates online connections, networked misogyny tries to create a toxic support system for men to spread sexist narratives in online and offline settings (Dickel & Evolvi, 2022). These two competing popular versions of long-standing ideologies are dynamically intertwined, and "live side by side, as warring, constantly moving contexts in an economy of visibility" (Banet-Weiser,

2018, p. 21). Banet-Weiser extends Robyn Wiegman's (1995) concept of 'economies of visibility' to demonstrate how, in our current era of advanced capitalism and networked multiple media platforms, popular feminism and popular misogyny compete for visibility in an economic marketplace. The economy of visibility is a system in which expressions and practices of popular feminism and misogyny are circulated on social media and where clicks, likes, and followers form a new kind of currency. The economy of visibility only makes certain media expressions of feminism hyper visible – the messages that center around women's inclusion (i.e., *Lean In*). These messages avoid confronting the structural issue and adopt a tone of voice that is intentionally "not angry" (p. 15), because "angry" is a code for wanting systemic change. Popular feminism intentionally distances itself from previous iterations of "killjoy" feminisms (Ahmed, 2010), which name systems of oppression and demand systemic change. Popular feminism does not alienate the oppressor, which helps in keeping it visible (and popular).

One of Banet-Weiser's (2018) critiques of popular feminism is that within this economy, visibility is an end to itself rather than to any tangible political or social transformation (p. 23). Unlike a "politics of visibility," where visibility strives to bring attention to an issue and eventually lead to collective action, within the economy of visibility, visibility is its only purpose. In other words, for popular feminism, visibility becomes the politics and not a route to politics. Therefore, whereas popular feminism might be visible, it rarely results in collective action required to change systems. Nevertheless, some popular feminism movements have indeed managed to stir the water, which is evident by the extent of the misogynist antagonism that has followed in their wake. The discourse of popular misogyny, on the other hand, is mainstream in comparison to feminism. Because popular misogyny is supported by the patriarchal system already in place, its effects can have real and terrifying results, such as the

wave of anti-abortion legislation following the repeal of *Roe V. Wade*, or Gamergate, which was massive harassment campaign meant to keep women out of the tech industry. In the sections that follow, I discuss the pervasive sexism of techno-capitalist culture and the feminist response to women's historical exclusion from the tech industry generally, and the games industry specifically.

## The Tech Industry during the EDI Era – Popular Feminism in Games and Tech

Industrial, financial, and corporate capitalism have long been the center of economic power and the backbone of white patriarchal dominance. The rapid expansion of digital capitalism[9] starting in the early 2000s, however, was disrupting and destabilizing these conventional economies. Economic and cultural power was being recentered, created, and cemented in and around technology fields, and creating new paths for social mobility in the process (Penny, 2014). Technological expansion is a capitalist project and digital technology represented a new frontier where individuals were 'staking their claim' to this space and all the riches that come with it.

### *Discourses of Neoliberal Capitalism: Creativity, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship*

Silicon Valley is a "VC-fueled hyper capitalist meritocracy" (Bacon, 2015, p.233) that emphasizes creativity and innovation as a new kind of economy (Banet-Weiser & Castells, 2017; Castells, 2017; Turner, 2006). In the tech world, a unique line of code can make you (and your shareholders) very rich, and billions of dollars are spent pursuing new and 'game changing'

[9] I use Jonathan Pace's (2020) concept of digital capitalism: "a collection of processes, sites, and moments in which digital technology mediates the structural tendencies of capitalism…it is capitalism's complex actualization in digital processes." (p. 262).

ideas. “Move fast and break things,” the famous catchphrase coined by Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, captures the ethos of Silicon Valley. The scramble to patent and announce the next technological innovation is a figurative gold rush, where the potential financial windfall outweighs the risk that comes with venturing out into uncharted territories. Venture capital firms invest in innovative tech startups that show promise to become lucrative enterprises, often with the goal of being sold for a large profit to a larger company as part of their bid to secure market dominance.

The meritocratic, neoliberal capitalist discourses that are embedded within the tech world emphasize that economic success can be achieved by those who are willing to work for it. The digital revolution that was brought about by the ubiquity of Internet usage in daily life was being driven by tech start-ups and “big tech” blue-chip companies that were revolutionizing how we worked, played, and communicated with each other. It was creating new markets and providing opportunities for entrepreneurship, not only for investors, but also for everyday individuals. Engaging in the hustle now extends beyond the young start-up entrepreneurial figure to practically anyone: a teenager creating content on social media (influencer economy), a college student driving for Uber (gig economy), or a stay-at-home-mom renting a room on Airbnb (sharing economy).

Moreover, in addition to creating opportunities for individual enterprise, Silicon Valley created a new class of labourer: the tech professional. The skilled labour demanded by the tech industry offers its workforce the high wages, financial security, and class mobility that were once reserved for white collar jobs. Unlike those forms of professional labour, which often require formal education and/or specialized credentials that acted as a barrier to entry, opportunities to work in tech were, in theory, open to anyone who could code, and as discussed in a later section,

learning to code could be undertaken by any self-enterprising individual, regardless of socioeconomic status. The tech industry is framed as an open and equal playing field. It is where the self-taught coder and the self-made businessman could both find economic success. Neoliberal capitalist logic dictates that becoming successful in the tech world required dedication, drive, and sacrifice (usually of time and money), but the opportunity to participate in the tech world is available to all, including women, who up until now had been shut out of tech.

***The Tech Industry's (Lack of) Women:***

The chronic underrepresentation of women working in STEM fields that has been documented for the last 20 years (AAUW, 2004; Cabot & Walravens, 2017; Consalvo, 2012; Corneliussen, 2012, 2023; Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Miltner, 2019; Mauk, Willett, & Coulter, 2020 Sturman, 2009;). This is an industry wide issue and not limited to any one domain. Women were noticeably absent in tech companies of all sizes and in all positions (Allen, 2015; Swallow, 2015), and this absence was widely acknowledged. Women who were working in tech were openly talking about their experiences and professional struggles and offering solutions to solve gender inequality in tech fields. Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, and Elissa Shevinksy's (2015) book, *Lean Out: The Struggle for Gender Equality in Tech and Start Up Culture*, are examples of contemporary, popular 'feminist manifestos' that addressed the underlying issues that drive women away from this industry, and, importantly, what women could do about it!

As noted in the previous section, *Lean In* is based the premise that the tech industry is already welcoming to women, whereas *Lean Out* openly acknowledges the embedded sexism of tech culture that women endure and experience. Although *Lean Out* is positioned as a counter

response to Sandberg, both books are situated within a postfeminist and neoliberal feminist framework, where women's oppression is treated not as systemic, but as an obstacle that can be overcome:

> "So many of us are fighting, martyring our way through, responding to a male-dominated ecosystem by hitting our head against one roadblock after another – like so many estrogen-fueled battering rams. Fully appreciating the impact made by women doing this work…. there is another way to be a woman entrepreneur: simply go around the obstacles. Don't ask for permission. Just go straight for the prize, which is more accessible that you'd think - building a real business with paying customers." (Shevinsky, 2015, p. 19).

Meritocracy is endemic to Silicon Valley (Cross, 2015), and both Sandberg (2013) and Shevinsky (2015) offer a view of the tech industry as an equal playing field where everyone can achieve economic success and emphasize that it is up to the individual to overcome her internalized thoughts and fears that prevents her from thriving in this environment. Both books assert that the goals of feminism (gender equality) and techno-capitalism (to make money) are not incompatible or at odds with each other, and frame women's inclusion and economic success in the tech industry as a feminist goal.[10]

The affirming language, unapologetic tone, and privileging of the individual that runs throughout *Lean In* and *Lean Out* are indicative of the underlying neoliberal logics that influence

[10] Regardless of whether one decides to "lean in" or "lean out", both solutions require a tremendous amount of privilege and access to cultural, material, and financial resources that can enable them to, as Shevinsky (2015) suggests, "simply go around the obstacles," of which there are many.

the tech industry. The discourse mirrors the ethos of "move fast and break things" and encourages staking your claim to the riches of Silicon Valley, which are available to women who have "the will to lead," as implied by Sandberg's book title. *Lean In* and *Lean Out* are exemplars of popular feminism's explanation for gender inequality in STEM is a presumed lack of self-confidence among girls and women. If the "injury" that women suffer in tech fields is exclusion, the solution, therefore, is to increase their confidence and competence (Mauk et. al., 2020). In other words, the answer to gender inequality lies in the capacity of girls and women to become empowered individuals – to gain skills that will allow them to enter tech. In the next section, I discuss one of the most highly visible forms of popular feminism within technology: the "teaching girls to code" movement.

### *Empowerment & Competence: Getting Girls into STEM*

Coding and programming instruction is viewed as essential for preparing young people to succeed in a digitally connected world (Kafai & Burke, 2016). "Learn to code" classes and programs are an integral part of the formal and informal education landscape (Miltner, 2019). They are offered by private and for-profit organizations, schools (Frieze & Blum, 2002; Tyler-Wood et. al. 2012), camps (Fisher, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015), community groups (Alexander, 2011; Nursall, 2014; Mauk et. al., 2020) and as a part of research studies into the issue (Harvey & Sheppard, 2013). The focus and urgency for girls to learn coding skills in particular stems from the chronic underrepresentation of women discussed in the previous section.

Girls' "learn to code" initiatives fail to acknowledge the historical and systemic issues that contribute to women's exclusion in the first place. For example, the organization Girls Who Code (2022) refers to their coding initiatives as part of the "national tech talent pipeline" that will help close the skills gap between girls and boys. By focusing on the pipeline, attention is

shifted away from systemic barriers, such as the ingrained sexism and racism of the industry, and the blame is instead placed on lack of education – girls can "break in" (and rise up) as long as they acquire technical skills (Miltner, 2019).

Girls' coding initiatives construct the solution to gender inequities in tech industries as increased training opportunities. This is a simple solution to a deep structural problem, that places the onus on girls themselves, and what Mauk et. al. (2020) call a "neoliberal tactic that emphasizes individualized solutions such as entrepreneurship, self-confidence, and empowerment" (p. 399). Moreover, the neoliberal and postfeminist underpinnings of popular feminism deflect attention away from ingrained misogynistic structures and instead put the blame on women (Banet-Weiser 2012, 2018; Gill, 2008; Rottenberg, 2014). The intensive individualization generated and perpetuated by neoliberalism frames the solution to gender inequity on women to "lean in" and empower themselves through self-development and skills acquisition.

The emphasis on a pipeline problem (and not structural inequities) is further buttressed by the discourses of "empowerment" and "girl power." As individualized postfeminist subjects, girls are positioned as independently responsible for not letting the gender gap deter them from participation in male dominated spaces. Discourses around girls' choices and agency as individualized postfeminist subjects, coupled with assumptions about gender equality, position girls as personally responsible for becoming the confident empowered girls (Banet-Weiser 2012, 2018; Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2009). This celebration of girls' choice and autonomy aligns with a form of postfeminism that emphasizes neoliberal individualism (Mauk et. al., 2020).

Girls are a metaphor for social change and represent the nations' hope for future economic prosperity and stability (Harris, 2004). Quite literally in this case, achieving gender

equity in computing fields is imperative to avoiding a national labour shortage (Mauk et. al., 2020). Anita Harris (2004) argues that girls are discursively positioned as either "can-do" or "at-risk." Like the women who Sandberg is addressing in *Lean In*, the "can-do" girl is the idealized neoliberal citizen; a flexible subject who is adaptable, compliant, and responsible for her own success (Banet-Weiser 2012, 2018; Harris, 2004). The tech industry simply needs more of the "can-do" girl and women who are willing to "lean in."

But the barriers facing girls and women in tech education and industry are varied and complex. The masculinization of computing culture has been reported on over the forty years (see, for example, Clegg, 2001; Cockburn, 1985; Jenson & Brushwood-Rose, 2003; Wajcman, 1991, 2007), contributing to the continued construction of tech domains as a "boys club." Programs/initiatives mean to get more girls and women "into the pipeline" rarely acknowledge, let alone address, the systemic sexism of the tech industry, such as gender-based discrimination (Seiner, 2019), sexual harassment (Haas, 2015), and a misogynistic work culture (Kolhatakar, 2017). As summarized by Mauk et. al. (2020, p.405):

> Empowering girls to code is a simple solution to the 'pipeline problem' of the lack of women in STEM careers as well as the potential crisis in the labour market…this logic is a distraction to real, structural challenge…this is the only rhetoric that becomes visible and therefore distracts from dialogue about broader systemic problems of misogyny and toxic masculinity of the tech industry. Thus getting girls to code still only trains and empowers girls to work within these structural inequities and does not challenge the structures.

Empowerment initiatives, as a form of popular feminism, are celebratory and highly visible but do not seek to disrupt patriarchal systems of power. The emerging 'call' of popular feminism to get more women into technology fields is met with a widespread 'response' by popular misogyny. But the territory of technology is one that is defended vehemently against potential interlopers who threaten the security of techno-capitalism as privileged site of patriarchy (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

### *Protecting Male Techno-Power*

Gender-based discrimination and women's harassment is endemic to the tech world has been happening for the last 30 years (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007). By the mid-2010s, the tech industry's problem with women was widely known, and even appeared to be getting worse.[11]

> "2014 was a harrowing year for women in the tech world. Google (followed quickly by other Silicon Valley heavy hitters) released its diversity data, and the numbers were disappointing as we expected. Tinder co-founder and former VP Marketing Whitney Wolfe filed a sexual harassment and sex-based discrimination lawsuit against the company. Tech conferences, from OSCON to DEFCON, continued to come under scrutiny for failing to protect women attendee's safety.

[11] Another example: In 2017, James Damore, a senior software engineer at Google posted an internal memo titled "Google's Ideological Echo Chamber." The memo questioned the company's diversity efforts and argued that the low number of women in technical positions was a result of "biological differences" instead of discrimination (Wakabayashi, 2017). In the memo, Damore relies on gender stereotypes to rationalize the gender gap in the high-pressure tech industry, stating, for example, that women are more "neurotic" and have lower "stress tolerance" than men. The memo not only speaks to the level of confidence that Damore (a white cis-het man) had in posting his anti-diversity views to an internal forum for all his colleagues to see, but also serves as an example of the tech industry's ongoing problems with fostering safe spaces for women (and minorities).

> Game developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu received rape and death threats, and video game critic Anita Sarkeesian was forced to cancel a speech at Utah State University after receiving death threats and threats to attendees. And Kathy Sierra, an influential thinker who famously left the spotlight in 2007 after being subjected to horrific online abuse, shut down her Twitter account, saying, 'Life for women in tech, today, is often better the less visible they are.'" (Bacon, 2015, p. 229-230)

The realm of technology, like capitalism, has historically been a mainstay of masculine dominance, and the increased participation of women in the tech world is seen as an encroachment on, and threat to, white male techno-power. The shift from conventional economies (e.g. financial, corporate, and industrial capitalism) to technology and Silicon Valley as a new power center created opportunities for those with technical skills to access and gain cultural and economic power. But capitalist power is always-already claimed by men. The riches of Silicon Valley were for men who possessed technical mastery (what Raewyn Connell (2005) refers to as the masculinity of the "counting house") and had also historically been injured by hegemonic forms of masculinity (what Connell (2005) calls "conquistador"-style manhood, which is characterized by aggressive and violent displays of strength).

By the early 2010s, the mainstream prominence of Silicon Valley, and the emphasis on technological creativity, had propelled the socially awkward, white, cis-het "techie" to new heights of cultural visibility (Bergstrom, Fisher, & Jenson, 2016). For example, both Apple co-founder Steve Jobs and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg have had mainstream movies made about their lives. This a popular veneration of white male founders in the tech industry supports

the perception that techno-power was reserved for young, white, socially awkward, men. This stereotype was perpetuated by men who looked like them and found this story favourable. The techno-capitalist ecosystem is comprised of different (white male) subcultures that are trying to protect and preserve tech spaces as a sanctuary and source for white male technopower. This was happening within and across the entire sector – in software development, cryptocurrency, and of course, in video games.

### *Games as a Microcosm for Silicon Valley*

The video game industry serves as a microcosm for what is happening in Silicon Valley in the EDI era. It has historically been (and continues to be) comprised almost entirely of young, white, cis-gendered, heterosexual men. The games industry presents itself as a meritocracy and attributes professional success to individual passion, drive, and dedication. It glorifies the grueling labour demands of the industry (e.g., 80-hour work weeks during "crunch time") and ignores how this demographic has a significant advantage over other groups when it comes to having free time to maintain this kind of work schedule. It is an industry built on the logics of neoliberal capitalism, which in turn maintains asymmetries of power that "manifest in everything from sexism to racism, from homophobia to poverty" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p.135). But in the late 2000s-early 2010, technological developments prompted an unprecedented shift in game play and production practices.[12] For example, the introduction of motion-based consoles such as the Nintendo Wii (which was marketed as a family console) allowed players of all skill levels to play games, and "casual games" that were played on social media and mobile platforms (such as

[12] For example, the introduction of motion-based consoles such as the Nintendo Wii (which was marketed as a family device) and Xbox Kinect allowed players of all skill levels to play games. A new genre of "casual games" were now being played on new online and mobile platforms (e.g., Farmville on Facebook, Candy Crush, Kim Kardashian Game) and appealed to audiences who did not consider themselves to be gamers.

*Farmville*, *Candy Crush,* and *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*) appealed to audiences who did not consider themselves to be gamers.

At the same time, DIY game development software also becoming widely available. The explosion of free DIY game development software in such as Game Maker and Twine meant that anyone with access to a computer and internet could make their own indie game (Harvey, 2014).[13] Indie games provided a low-barrier entry into the games industry and represented a gateway to economic success in tech. Anyone could teach themselves how to make an indie game and call themselves a game developer. Moreover, the immense popularity financial success of games like *Angry Birds* (2009), *Fez* (2012), and *Gone Home* (2013) served as examples of indie game developers striking it rich and making it big. In summary, video games – which had up until now been seen as the exclusive domain of boys and men – was now open to those who had previously been excluded. This resulted in more girls and women playing and making games than ever before.

The culture of video games industry is representative of the structural issues that girls and women face across tech industries. Addressing these issues requires acknowledging the central role that sexism plays in organizing video game spaces, both in professional and leisure contexts. In the sections that follow, I engage with research that documents the prevalence of sexism in videogames culture and industry, the experiences of girls/women playing and making games, and how, in the mid-2010s, video games was the site of a culture war and served as a battleground where popular feminism and popular misogyny in tech battled it out.

[13] Indie games can generally be defined as games that were created without the support of a large or established AAA game company.

**The Hegemony of Play**

> *"Videogames are gendered. They are gendered in terms of perceptions about gaming "itself" being always-already a "boy's activity"; they are gendered in terms of genre choices; in terms of "actual" gaming dynamic – where, how and with whom games are played." (Thornham, 2008, p. 127).*

The structural issue in games culture that popular feminism does not confront is white male supremacy (Gray, 2012a, 2012b; Fron et. al. 2007; Ruberg, 2019; Shaw, 2011). The concept of the "hegemony of play," put forth by Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Morie and Celia Pearce (2007) over 17 years ago, is a useful critique of the complex technological, commercial, and cultural power structures that have dominated the growth and development of the video game industry and have created an entrenched status quo. The hegemony of play is a system of discourses that organizes games culture and privileges white, heterosexual, cisgender men (Fron et. al., 2007). It naturalizes discourses that positions men as naturally better than women when it comes to using technology, which includes playing and making video games.

The composition of the games industry itself serves as evidence of the hegemony of play. Although the number of women working in games has increased over the last 20 years, from 10% in 2001 (Shirinian, 2012), to 22% in 2013 (Weststar & Legault, 2018), to 30% in 2021 (Kumar, Kwan, Weststar, & Coppins, 2022), the majority of game makers identify as white (78%), heterosexual (68%), cisgender men (62%) (Kumar et. al., 2022). Women and persons of colour are "highly underrepresented" in the industry (Kumar et. al., 2022, p. 20). White men dominate the most stable and permanent employment in the game industry, are overrepresented in senior and middle management roles, and are the most prevalent in all roles expect for

administration (Kumar et. al., 2022). In the section "Importance of Diversity in the Industry, Workplace, and Game Content" Kumar et. al. (2022) note:

> In 2021, 87% of game makers surveyed said that diversity was somewhat or very important to the workplace, 90% said it was somewhat or very important to the game industry, and 89% said it was somewhat or very important to game content. These numbers are higher than in the 2016 Developer Satisfaction Survey Diversity Report, where between 62%-72% or respondents viewed diversity as important in each context…When these responses are compared across different respondent identities, a noticeable gender pattern emerges: more minority and non-minority women said that diversity was important in the workplace, in the gaming industry, and especially in game content when compared to men. These results are similar to the 2016 Developer Satisfaction Survey Diversity Report and are not surprising. In addition to being underrepresented in the workforce, women have experienced discrimination in their workplaces, derogatory representations of their gender in game content, as well as general invisibility within the wider game culture. They are more acutely aware of the value in diverse participation and representations." (Kumar et. al., 2022, p. 31-32)

Research on how routines of production and professional ideologies operate in the game industry reveals that women have complicated relationships with the game industry's work culture (Butt, 2022; Consalvo, 2008; Deuze, Martin & Allen 2007; Johnson, 2014). Within game studios, discourses of masculinity create and reproduce a culture the excludes women. Employees adopt

masculine norms and discourses in major facets of game development work, including in design, arts and programming (Johnson, 2014). Furthermore, the frequent conflation of work and play in the industry (e.g., alcohol consumption in the workplace) is also considered to negatively affect women employees (Butt, 2022). In characterizing game development work as play (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2006), industry norms like Friday night happy hours and working late into the evening to socialize are often alienating for women and other employees whose interests and identities does not align with these practices. Game scholars have also noted that because the majority of mainstream commercial games are made by and marketed to boys and men, they have an easier time adopting and maintaining identities as gamers, and are therefore more likely to become game developers themselves (Deuze et. al., 2007; Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2006; Fullerton, Fron, Pearce, & Morie, 2008).

According to the Entertainment Software Association (2024), girls and women make up 46% of players. Despite the actuality of a diverse player base, marketing campaigns and media depictions of "hardcore gamers" (the default "gamer identity") reinforce the idea that video games are the exclusive domain of predominantly white, heterosexual, cisgender men (Bergstrom, Fisher, & Jenson, 2016; Cote, 2015; [14]). The "hardcore gamer" is an industry construction that frames white straight men as the ideal market and target audience for modern video games (Kerr, 2006; Shaw, 2011).

To summarize, games are primarily made and played by white cisgender heterosexual men, the "hardcore gamer" identity is constructed as the default audience for video games, video games are created and played in spaces that are dominated by men, and this is considered the

[14] In her study on how marginalized players articulate their relationship to gaming writ large, Shaw (2011) notes that negative connotations about gaming (for example, as a trivial pastime) lead people to not identify as gamers, even if they play video games.

'natural order' (Fron et. al., 2007). Under these conditions, sexism and misogyny is endemic to video game industry and culture, which I discuss in the following section.

**Sexism and Misogyny in Video Games**

The prevalence of sexism and misogyny[15] in games content and in game spaces has negatively affected and harmed individuals, community growth, and the creative potential of video games (Boudreau, 2022; Delamere & Shaw, 2008; Gray, Buyukozturk,& Hill, 2017). Women are consistently and routinely objectified in representations (Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Kennedy, 2002; Sarkeesian, 2013) and marginalized within gamer communities (Butt, 2022; Sarkeesian & Cross, 2015). Gender-based discrimination in the games industry has been tracked and referenced in research for almost twenty years (Consolvo, 2008; Jenson & de Castell, 2013; Prescott & Bogg 2011a, 2011b). In a previous study where I interviewed first-time women game developers (Fisher & Harvey, 2013), interviewees reported that one of the reasons they had not made a game before was due to the sexism, misogyny, and marginalization they had experienced when attending public gaming events.

In addition to being sexist, scholars have documented the problematic intersectionality of hegemonic white masculinity by showing the myriad of ways that game spaces can also be racist, homophobic, and transphobic (Brock, 2011, 2020; Dorias, 2018; Gray, 2014, 2018, 2020; Shaw, 2014; McKernan, 2015; Ruberg, 2019; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). Interactions in these spaces are often racialized and gendered, presuming a white male centrality (Milner, 2013). An overarching

[15] Sexism and misogyny are related terms, but not identical or interchangeable. Sexism – the discrimination against women based on sex - includes stereotypes against women and sexual objectification, but it is not necessarily violent. Misogyny – the hatred and prejudice against women - is deeply embedded in patriarchal norms and social structures of power that create everyday instances of sexism (Mann, 2017). Misogyny may employ sexism to punish women who do not conform to patriarchal norms, to maintain the societal roles of patriarchy.

problem with techno-culture writ large is that "dominant white culture claims to be 'colorblind' and dismisses concerns about racism as irrelevant…added to this is an Internet culture, also predominantly white, in which humor is the highest value and charges of racism are regarded as the purview of the humorless and the overly serious." (Daniels & Lalone, 2014, p. 96-97). Thus, it is very difficult to tackle problems of both overt and subtle racism in gaming spaces, as they are ignored or dismissed (Voorhees et. al., 2024). Under these conditions, social injustices – or what Kishonna Gray (2014) calls "deviant behaviors" - appear natural, normal, and inevitable. For example, in her research on the nature of social interactions within the Xbox Live online gaming platform, Gray (2014) describes how marginalized bodies that fall outside ( or "fail to conform") to the hegemonic norm of whiteness and masculinity become victims of racism, sexism and other types of harassment (e.g., 90% of Black women who play console video games were victims of violence compared to 45% of white women).

Women are subjected to much higher incidences of harassment when they enter online spaces (Bezio, 2018; Gray, 2014). This harassment can range from private, one-time messaging to massive, coordinated campaigns against "problematic" women (for an example of both, see Sarkeesian & Cross, 2015). To add insult to injury, victims of harassment are often blamed for the violence that is perpetrated on them (United Nations Broadband Commission for Digital Development, Working Group on Broadband and Gender, 2015). Online harassment against women is dismissed, downplayed, or excused as "trolls being trolls" and widely accepted as the 'price' for being visibly female in spaces where gamers gather online (Sarkeesian & Cross, 2015). As a key component of "toxic technocultures" (Massanari, 2017), it is within these online gaming communities where toxic geek masculinity thrives.

**Toxic Geek Masculinity**

Toxic geek masculinity is a sub-culture that is hostile to women who do not participate in the dominant discourses of white male supremacy[16] and creates a context within STEM communities that is not only unwelcoming but also dangerous to women (Cross, 2015; Cross & Sarkeesian, 2015; Massanari, 2017; Varma, 2007). Toxic geek masculinity is circulated and propagated through sociotechnical networks such as Reddit, 4chan, Twitter, and online gaming, and contributes to the formation of a "toxic technoculture" (Massanari, 2017; see also Braithwaite, 2014; Condis, 2014; McKernan, 2015; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Toxic technocultures coalesce around a particular issue or event, and the tactics used within these cultures often rely heavily on implicit or explicit harassment of others.

As an important part of the manosphere, toxic technocultures spread regressive ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality, and race, push against issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism, and propagate the belief that men are victims of feminism (Dickel & Evolvi, 2022; Massanari, 2017). The hardships of geek masculinity predominantly revolve around being bullied and socially awkward around women. Those who identify with geek culture often feel marginalized because their interests in STEM and subcultures such as comics and gaming have traditionally been marked by dominant culture as 'not manly,' and they have been rejected as objects of sexual desire. Toxic geek masculinity has sustained double injuries, by both hegemonic masculinity and feminists (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Because of this, critiques of the immense amount of (white, male) capital that geeks possess may be met with skepticism and outright hostility (Penny, 2014). Massanari (2017) notes that when feminists have pointed out the

[16] Spaces that are dedicated to geek culture and STEM interest, such as video games, exhibit the tendency to view women as either objects of sexual desire or unwelcome interlopers or both (Varma, 2007; Salter & Blodgett, 2012).

sexist and racist reactions of geek men to women inclusion in technology fields, it is met with a sense of disconnect. Geek men often feel that they are the victims (the world has been hostile to *them*) and are "likely to view themselves as perpetual outsiders and thus are unable or unwilling to recognize their own immense privilege" (p. 332).

Although patriarchy is to blame for "making life hell for 'shy, nerdy men' (Penny, 2014, n.p.), toxic male geeks see themselves as victims of feminism. Toxic geek masculinity frames women's inclusion in tech fields as doubly injurious. Not only have women rejected geeks as object of sexual desire, but women's technical mastery is an unwelcome intrusion on their territory (i.e., Connell's (2005) 'masculinity of the counting house'). Popular misogyny is a zero-sum game where women's inclusion in tech is viewed as an unjust power grab by women, and the "aggressive and violent regulation and exclusion of women is a way to regain masculine capacity" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 156). Gamergate is the pinnacle example of popular misogyny's vitriolic response the popular feminism's call to get more women into technology fields.

**The Road to Gamergate: The Rise of Popular Feminism in Games**

Popular feminism and misogyny in games had been on the rise in the years preceding Gamergate (which started in 2014). In the early 2010s, public feminist discourse that critiqued sexism in games culture and industry and confronted issues of hyper- and toxic geek masculinity was becoming more frequent and visible (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). For the first time ever, the everyday sexism experienced by women playing and working in a toxic gaming culture was being widely documented and exposed across multiple online platforms – tumblrs, blogs, social

media, YouTube. For example, the blog *Fat, Ugly or Slutty* [17] collected and posted submitted screenshots of the sexist (and often violent) messages that women received when playing online video games. When viewed on an individual basis, these messages could be dismissed as one-off, isolated incidents; however, when viewed together, the blog paints a mosaic of undeniable misogyny (Jenson & de Castell, 2013).

At this time, women game makers were also starting to speak publicly about their experiences with sexism in the workplace. In 2012, hundreds of women responded to a Tweet asking "why are there so few lady creators" as part of the #1ReasonWhy campaign (Ochsner, 2019). #1ReasonWhy contributors provided reasons why they were put off from joining the industry, why they were leaving, or why they had left. A spin-off counter campaign, #1ReasonToBe, was also created to highlight positive experiences about working in the games industry. The creator of #1ReasonToBe hashtag, Rhianna Prachett, stated:

> "I'm not looking to dismiss the significance of #1reasonwhy in the least, but I think it's important to remind women (and for them to remind themselves) of what can be great about working in games. I wouldn't want potential female developers of the future to get completely scared off. We're striving for better balance, after all." (Hamilton, 2012).

Similar to the 'girls that code' empowerment initiatives discussed earlier in this chapter, Prachett's comment exemplifies the neoliberal postfeminism that is underpinning the #1ReasontoBe hashtag. It diverts attention away from structural issues of sexism by re-stating

[17] *Fat, Ugly, or Slutty started in 2011, stopped actively posting in 2017, and officially shut down the website in 2023. The blog (*http://fatuglyorslutty.com*) is still available on archive.org.*

that the solution to gender equity is inclusion ("better balance, after all") and placing the onus on the individual women to "remind themselves" on how to deal with sexism, which is practicing gratitude as a form of self-care. Furthermore, the non-confrontational and industry-friendly feminism of #1ReasontoBe is now an annual panel at the Game Developer's Conference in the Advocacy Track. The focus of the panel has shifted from gender diversity to showcasing "geographical diversity", where developers from around the globe share their personal stories of struggle, hardship and eventual triumph (demonstrating how an entrepreneurial spirit leads to success in the industry), through their persistence, effort and by not giving up. The panel's message is: "Inclusivity is a battle we can win" (Batchelor, 2019, n.p.).

The success of #1ReasontoBe illustrates how within the economy of visibility, feminisms that are critical of dominant orders (such as #1ReasonWhy) are eclipsed by feminisms that do not challenge structural issues (#1ReasontoBe). Inclusivity focused and "happy" feminisms like #1ReasontoBe are highlighted and amplified across multiple platforms, overshadowing the "angry" feminisms like #1ReasonWhy, which are critical of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism.

The mass networked mobilization of feminist sentiment of both #1ReasonWhy and #1ReasontoBe – be it gratitude or anger – illustrates the multiple feminist discourses that circulate within the games industry. While the calls to feminist action varied, what is clear is that women were speaking up, voicing their opinions, and sharing their stories. An emerging 'popular feminism in games' discourse was being circulated and exchanged by the 'new gaming public' (Salter & Blodgett, 2012).

**Gamergate: Reactionary Rage Gone Viral**

While new technologies were enabling individuals to push back on an oppressive and toxic gaming culture, those same technologies equally enabled this toxicity to rise, bubble up, and eventually, explode, as was the case with Gamergate. Salter & Blodgett (2012) note how the same online technologies used by the new gaming public to amplify feminist discourse also served the objectives of online popular misogyny.

> "While the technologies of the new gaming public put on an air of openness and inclusiveness, the authors argue that this is a mask behind which a form of gender essentialism hides which precipitates a harsh reprisal for any who dare to speak out about the dominant paradigm. Although the original gaming public's identity is based upon the outsider group mentality, their in-group dynamics have expanded upon women-hostile concepts of masculinity within the larger social sphere. This discourse, as amplified across social networks and in public online spaces, allows for extreme and virulent lashing out against those who are perceived as others, most notably women. Such silencing warps the seemingly social spaces of Web 2.0 into tools for the exclusion and perpetuation of a male-dominated gaming social public" (Salter & Blodgett, 2012, p. 401-402).

Although harassment of women in games was not a new phenomenon, as exemplified by the doxxing of Kathy Sierra in 2007 and the campaign against Anita Sarkeesian for "Tropes v. Women in Video Games" series in 2012, Gamergate was reactionary rage gone viral and occurs in a particular historical moment, where the simmering tensions between the promises of

feminism and the culture of techno-capitalism finally boiled over. It was triggered by a derogatory blog post written by the ex-boyfriend of indie game developer Zoe Quinn (Hathway, 2014; Kain, 2014). The post shared intimate stories of their relationship and accused Quinn of trading sex for positive reviews of her game *Depression Quest* (2013). On the surface, Gamergate was supposedly about demanding "ethics in games journalism," however this was a thin veil for the targeted harassment against Quinn and other highly visible feminists in games that was organized across multiple online communities where gamers gathered (Braithwaite, 2016). As Quinn (2017) details in their memoir about the experience, the constant barrage of threats to their personal safety was so intense that they were forced to leave their home and not return for months, and their friends, family, colleagues and supporters also became targets for online harassment.[18]

Gamergate is an example of popular misogyny in games, where women's empowerment and feminism is seen as injurious to men, and the response is for men to take back power. Because popular misogyny is a zero-sum game, the very existence of a game like *Depression Quest,* a free to play game documenting the creator's experience with depression, and the success of a game developer like Zoe Quinn, a femme-presenting person who identifies and queer and non-binary, represented a loss of power and a threat to white male supremacy in gaming.

[18] This was something I personal experienced several times during Gamergate. The most intense was the direct harassment I received for being on a panel with Quinn at the Game Developer's Conference in 2016. I also experienced harassment when Pixelles, the non-profit women in games organization that I co-direct, was targeted over a Twitter post made by a fellow co-director criticizing Nintendo for its stereotypical depiction of a mariachi "Mexican" Mario as offensive and racist. In both cases, I received threats to my personal safety and had to shut down my social media and professional email accounts. I watched how misinformation about myself, my collaborators, and Pixelles was spread around 8chan and Reddit, unable of course to respond to any of it. I stopped speaking at conferences, and took a break from my research. I don't bring up these examples lightly. Even in 2024, I am still deeply concerned about my own and others' safety when speaking about feminism in games, but I think it's important to share my experience with to demonstrate how easily and casually online harassment against women can spread in an attempt to destroy the intended target's personal and professional networks, credibility, and livelihoods.

Gamergate was widely reported in mainstream media. It was on the front page of the *New York Times*, featured on late-night talk show *The Colbert Report,* and even discussed during a session of the UN's Working Group on Broadband and Gender. It brought widespread public awareness to the tech industry's problem with women that had been going on for the last 30 years. Scholarly research on Gamergate has examined the underpinning ideologies (Jong, 2020), it's role in the political rise of alt-right populism and white supremacy (Bezio, 2018), as an example toxic geek masculinity (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Butt, 2022), and where online harassment of women is normalized (Braithwaite, 2016; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Gray et. al., 2017; Mortensen, 2016). Throughout these studies, the premise is the same: those who participated in Gamergate felt that video games (a space associated with white male authority and privilege) was being threatened by feminists who were intent on "destroying gaming" (Bezio 2018; Mortensen, 2016). For cultural studies scholar Kristen Bezio (2018), Gamergate exemplifies:

> "the 'ethos of ostensible disenfranchisement' of (young, 20- and 30-something) people for whom whiteness and masculinity (or one or the other) have been their primary form of social capital. The suggestion that whiteness and male-ness are no longer a form of political or social currency – or, at least, that their value as such is being eroded – means that there is no room for forms of citizenship and leadership that do not belong to the proverbial old white men." (Bezio, p. 564).

Relegating Gamergate to the domain of gaming downplays how this fight to maintain techno-capitalism as a privilege site for patriarchy was used as a launchpad for the different strands of alt-right political extremism that is still happening today. Bezio (2018) demonstrates

the power of networked popular misogyny by connecting the history and sociality of online videogame communities to the subsequent rise of alt-right populism. Proponents of Gamergate justified their actions by arguing that "a small fraction of feminists are taking over video-game journalism and shifting the focus from a love of video games to gender relations" (Ramsay, 2015, cited in Bezio, 2018), and connected a "feminist conspiracy in games" to an imagined Marxist-feminist takeover of higher education institutions. Gamergate was a testbed that helped develop and spread the discourse of fighting back against 'woke liberals' and 'cultural Marxists' who seek to undermine freedom (of speech). This discourse would later be refined and repeated by toxic populist figures such as Jordan Petersen and Donald Trump, leading to real life disenfranchisement of marginalized groups.

**Feminist Activism in the EDI Era: Women-in-Games Organizations**

In this chapter, I have drawn on scholarly work from girl studies, feminist studies, and games studies to provide the historical context that explains young women's feminist activism and the culture of techno-capitalism in the mid-2010s. Within girl studies, the research on girls' political activism in media spaces, particularly studies that examine young women's uses of media for feminist activism within participatory cultures, is essential for understanding how young people talk about their feminist activism in media spaces. Within feminist studies, popular feminism as defined by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) is central to understanding contemporary feminism in the tech sector, where gender equality can be achieved through inclusion and by empowering girls teaching them technical skills. Popular feminism is entwined with the logics of neoliberal feminism, which tells girls that they need to be confident enough to pull up a seat at

the table, and postfeminism, which insists that they were already invited to sit at that table in the first place.

Within game studies, research that uses feminist theory to show the lived experiences of girls and women in game spaces is crucial to understanding how ingrained, systemic sexism prevents young women from fully participating in games culture and industry. While new technologies make game development more accessible than ever, the industry remains a boys club. The white male supremacy of the hegemony of play has been embedded into games since the beginning of the games industry, creating a cyclical system of supply and demand that would continue until the early 2010s, when major cultural shifts would create room for a 'new gaming public' (Salter & Blodgett, 2012) who were critical of the entrenched status quo that sought to keep them on the margins when it came to making and playing games.

Popular feminism's message of women's empowerment does not challenge white male techno-power, while "angry" feminisms that critique the status quo are simultaeneously overshadowed by happy industry-friendly feminisms and interpreted as a threat to the authority of white men, who are prepared to defend the domain of games from feminist intruders. At the core of my study is an examination of how grassroots, community-based, feminist women-in-games organizations can create spaces for feminist politics but also reproduce systemic inequities. Itsmall body of community-engaged research studies conducted with feminist, women-in-games organizations, including Sarah Schoemann's (2021) work which examines the underlying values of local women-in-games initiatives in comparison to other feminist organizing spaces to assess their capacity to engage in broader advocacy work and feminist coalition building, as well as work by Kelly Boudreau (2022), who illustrates how women-focused gaming community spaces have responded to toxic gaming culture and work towards

creating change within the games industry. Following Boudreau (2022) and Schoemann (2021), and in line with my previous and ongoing research collaborations with Alison Harvey (Fisher & Harvey, 2013, 2023; Harvey & Fisher, 2013, 2015, 2016; Chung, Harvey & Fisher, 2023), this study contributes scholarly understandings of feminist activism in games that is grounded in the lived experiences of individuals (feminist game makers) who are engaged in activism at the grassroots level. In particular, this study illustrates the messiness and complexities of feminist WIG communities, and how they are enmeshed with, uphold, and challenge hegemonic systems of oppression (such as patriarchy, capitalism, racism, heteronormativity).

## Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework: LGC as a Platform for Popular Feminism

In the early to mid-2010s, there was an increase in public feminist discourse circulating in the games industry. 'Feminism in games' was emerging as a dispersed, networked movement that was happening in online and offline spaces. Lady Game Club (LGC), a local, grassroots, feminist community organization that supports women learning how to make digital games, is a part of this network. In the larger ecosystem of video game communities and women-in-tech initiatives, LGC is unique because it was an explicitly feminist space, and therefore, an explicitly political space. However, feminism, as a movement or political ideology, was rarely talked about by the organization.[19] While LGC was a space where game makers could talk about feminism, the ways in which feminism informed the structure, processes, and operations of the organization was unclear, as noted by one Storyteller: "Like how does LGC even define feminism? Does it mean getting more women into the industry? Challenging gender equality at a structural level?" Some Storytellers found LGC's unstated 'feminist stance' to be inclusive and advantageous because it created a space where all types of feminisms were welcome. Other Storytellers, however, found this ambiguity "confusing" and "disorienting," and felt a tension between their personal feminist beliefs and the culture of the organization. This friction left some Storytellers feeling anxious, alienated, and feeling that their feminism was "the wrong kind of feminism" for the LGC space. LGC might be a feminist space, but its feminist politics were not easily defined or transparent. This research seeks to uncover the feminist logics of LGC by analyzing the structure of the organization and experiences of its community members.

[19] When asked what made LGC a feminist organization, LGC's leadership team spoke about their personal practices of feminism (what feminism meant to them as individuals who make games) or described how LGC was a 'safe space' for women and other marginalized game makers (in opposition to the other local game communities, which were dominated by white and heterosexual men). Feminism was used by LGC to differentiate itself from other apolitical games/tech spaces and mark itself as a safe space where discussions about women's struggles and feminism were welcome.

To understand the feminist practices of the Storytellers and the feminist mission of LGC, it is essential to write about the specific time and place in which this research is taking place and discuss how LGC situates itself within local and broader contexts. In this chapter, I provide the background history and context of the Toronto game community at this time[20] and the circumstances that led to the creation of LGC. Following this, I review LGC's mission statement, focusing on how it positions itself as a platform for public engagement. I then introduce the feminist theories that I draw upon to theorize and analyse LGC as a platform for 'feminism in games' before posing the research questions for this study.

## LGC's Origin Story: The Toronto Indie Game Scene in 2011

LGC was formed in 2011. This is around the time when more women started to enter the games industry (Weststar & Legault, 2018), public critiques of sexism and toxicity in the games industry were becoming more visible (Salter & Blodgett, 2012), and women who spoke up against sexist conditions were subjected to online harassment (Braithwaite, 2016; Chess & Shaw, 2015). The creation of LGC emerged out of a very specific context, where women did not feel comfortable participating in Toronto's male dominated independent (indie) game maker community at this time:

[20] The history of the organization is based on ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted between 2011 and 2015. Fieldwork includes researcher observations (notes), my direct involvement in several committees and my role as a co-director in 2015, and interviews with LGC members (Storytellers) who were actively involved in different capacities (e.g., volunteers, participants, organizers, board members). The data I collected is also supplemented by documents that were produced by LGC and made publicly available on their website (e.g., blog posts, year-in-review reports, video recordings of talks and presentations).

> “I don't really go to things like IGDA[21] meetings. I find those intimidating. Ever since going to one about game graphics and being a game artist, and there was like 300 men and 5 women, and I was just like "uhhhhh".... Not that I should be intimidated, but you are, just being outnumbered by the same type of guys, it puts you off a little bit. I feel like that is kind of what LGC's role is, to provide support.” (Storyteller K).

The desire and demand for participating in a women-centered games space at this time could be seen by the popularity of the Diversity in Games Initiative (DGI), a 6-week women-in-games incubator program that was run in the latter half of 2011 (which I have previously written about in Fisher & Harvey, 2013). Over 60 women showed up to the DGI information session, demonstrating that women were searching for women-only learning and community spaces, but perhaps, like the Storyteller above, did not feel comfortable in game spaces where they were a visible minority. In addition to simply not wanting to be outnumbered by men, there was also need for spaces where the different forms of oppression that women (and other marginalized) games makers experienced in these homogenous spaces would be recognized and perhaps even discussed.

Although the primary objective of the DGI program was to teach women how to make their first game, the participants also enjoyed being able to speak freely about their experiences in other game spaces, and the marginalization and exclusion of women in game development at large. After the end of the DGI program, the alumni wanted to continue supporting each other and connect with other women game makers. They did this by creating a local community group

[21] IGDA stands for International Game Developers Association. This is a professional association with multiple chapters around the work that is focused on providing networking and professional development opportunities for its members.

where women[22] could meet other women who were interested making games and called it Lady Game Club (LGC).

The DGI alumni leveraged different platforms and opportunities to spread the word about LGC. For example, the DGI alumni talked about LGC through social media (Facebook and Twitter), while networking at game development community gatherings, and during media appearances and other formally organized speaking opportunities (e.g. exhibitions, showcases, conference panels). LGC's purpose was to organize events that would allow women game makers to connect with each other (see Appendix A: handbill below for the first social). The response to LGC's first events was overwhelming, and the evolution of LGC in its first year of existence was meteoric (see Appendix B: DGI/LGC Timeline of Events 2011-2012). What began as a grassroots social group quickly evolved into a formal community organization that took it upon themselves to be the "welcoming space" for women who wanted to learn how to make games in Toronto. LGC was officially incorporated as a non-profit organization in August 2012 (exactly one-year after the start of the DGI program), and by the end of 2012, the organization had a flashy website, office space, a mission statement, a membership program, merchandise, and offered a range of different programs to teach women how to make games and also help them 'break into' the games industry (e.g., speaker series, workshops, incubators, etc.).

**LGC's Feminist Mission**

LGC was a unique and important space in the Toronto game maker community because it was an explicitly feminist space from the start. This was partially in response to disparaging

[22] In 2011, women-in-games initiatives were only starting to talk about how non-binary and trans women were excluded from women-only spaces. In 2024, the language of 'women only' can be interpreted as transphobic. Over the last decade, many 'women in games' initiative have shifted their language to be more inclusive (e.g. "gender marginalized" instead of "women").

public remarks made about the DGI program (that women-only spaces were too exclusionary to be justifiable and that feminism was "disruptive to the game making process"; see Alexander, 2012), but also meant to signal to women game makers that it was OK to discuss their feelings of exclusion and marginalization without being labeled a killjoy. LGC's mission statement [23] was as follows:

> "LGC is a not-for-profit videogame arts organization that creates space for marginalized creators to make, play, and critique videogames within a cultural context. We teach computing skills for artistic expression, offer production and exhibition facilities, and provide community support for the creation of new artworks. Our space and community is a **platform and playground** for artists working in games, engaging the public with the expressive potential of this medium. We believe game-making can be an act of **resistance**, giving creators ultimate agency in the expression of their identities, politics, selves, genders and sexualities. Our work has the power to transform our communities, and positively impact policies and practice. We believe that creating **space and time** to make and talk about games in an explicitly feminist context elevates the craft, amplifies alternative and diverse narratives, and supports the socio-cultural changes that are necessary to make game design accessible to all." (2015, bold formatting from original, underlining my own)

[23] LGC's mission statement evolved several times over the years. I use the 2014-2015 mission statement because this is when most of the Storyteller interviews were taking place. It was also the most fulsome and descriptive mission statement to date.

LGC refers to itself a platform on which feminist game making is "elevated" and "amplified," an "act of resistance," and has the "power to transform our communities." I am a feminist researcher using feminist theory to make sense of what is happening in a feminist community, and part of my methodology as a feminist embedded ethnographer means using the names and definitions that the community gives itself to inform and guide my research analysis. Following LGC's lead in using the word platform to describe itself, I employ Rinka Singh's (2021) concept of platform feminism to theorize about how LGC serves as a platform for feminism in games.

**Theoretical Framework: Platform Feminism**

"Platform feminism" is a media theory proposed by Rianka Singh (2018, 2021) that positions the platform as a media object that elevates some voices over others while rendering marginal resistance tactics illegible. Platform feminism offers an emerging view of platforms as an always-already useful form of empowerment and has come to structure and dominate popular imaginaries of feminist politics (Singh & Banet-Weiser, 2022). Singh (2021) notes that platforms have long been framed as necessary for a kind of empowerment, "they are spaces and places to amplify one's voice, to have a speaking part in a narrative, and to display power" (p. 712).

In popular discourse, to be given a platform is synonymous with being given a voice. The way that LGC's describes itself as a platform can be understood in different ways, which fits with the typology of platforms that is offered by Tarleton Gillespie (2010) (as computational, architectural, figurative, political, etc.). For example, LGC's platform could be interpreted in a figurative sense (as position achieved, or as a starting point that enables some meaningful activity), or in the political sense (a place to articulate political views, such as LGC's

organizational core values and mission statement). Gillespie (2010) argues that throughout all these different types of platforms, the meaning of the platform "suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement promising to support those who stand on it" (p. 350). This liberatory framing of the platform as an authorizing, open, and empowering space - where anyone and everyone can speak and be heard - is often sold through the vision statements of the platform's producer (Bannerman, Baade, Bivens, Shade, Shepherd, & Zeffiro, 2020; Singh & Banet-Weiser, 2022). This can be seen in the LGC mission statement, where the organization frames itself as a platform for feminist resistance in games where marginalized game makers are empowered and given a voice; where women can "make and talk about games in an explicitly feminist context" and this in turn "elevates the craft, amplifies alternative and diverse narratives, and supports the socio-cultural changes that are necessary to make game design accessible to all" (LGC, 2014, n.p.).

But platforms are not a neutral space. Singh (2021) argues that the logics of the platform produce the politics, and platforms in turn organize and structure the political:

> "… regardless of form, platforms are a very specific media that elevate and amplify. In attending to this logic, it is possible to see how platforms function as media that also organize the political and the social in particular ways; the platform is a medium that elevates some voices and renders particular ways of resisting legible. This too often translates into the elevating of only normative modes of resisting - only those modes of resisting that rely on the platform tend to register as resistance in the first place....in considering the platform as a media object that structures the political, rather than a series of discrete surfaces where

political and economic life plays out, we can better attend to the limits of platform power." (p. 712)

In its mission statement, LGC describes itself as a platform that has the potential to "make feminism in games accessible to the broader public" (LGC, 2014, n.p.). From organizing free social events to selling merchandise, LGC makes it easy for anyone to participate in the growing feminism in games movement. The organizations' focus on inclusion, and also making feminism accessible and visible, is aligned with the ethos of popular feminism, which was flourishing during this time (the early to mid-2010s).

Popular feminism[24] and platform feminism are complimentary theories that are both concerned with how certain feminisms come to be elevated and amplified, and the implications of this for contemporary feminist political movements. By using Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of popular feminism (where multiple, different feminisms are competing for dominance and visibility) and Singh's (2018, 2021) notion of platform feminism (where the platform structures the political and social), I theorize LGC as a platform that mediates and circulates expressions and practices of popular feminism in games. In other words, I posit that LGC is a platform for popular feminism in games. To explore this further, I ask the following three research questions:

[24] As discussed in chapter 2, popular feminism is an affirmative, celebratory and corporate-friendly feminism that is focused on inclusion as the solution of gender problems (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The values of neoliberalism (self-entrepreneurship, economic success, new market growth), and a post-feminist sensibility (repudiation of feminist politics and values) are both an essential part of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, Gill, Rottenberg, 2020). Feminisms that are grounded in neoliberal and post-feminist logics (such as corporate feminism or celebrity feminism) are the most amplified, highly visible, and easily reproduced. In comparison, feminisms that critique structural inequities (such as intersectional, anti-capitalist, or anti-racist feminisms) are obscured and rendered invisible. The default subject of these feminisms are most often white, middle-class, able-bodied and heterosexual women.

1. What are the feminist logics of LGC and how do they structure the political and the social?
2. What feminisms are the most visible and what feminisms are obscured on the LGC platform?
3. What registers as feminist resistance at LGC?

To answer these questions, I examine the structure and design of LGC through the experiences of its members to better understand how certain feminist practices come to be amplified and elevated over others. Scholars often do not have the time and resources to cultivate the kind of long-standing relationships that community-engaged research requires. I am grateful to have been involved in the LGC community since its inception, and it is a privilege to be in my position. As someone who was deeply invested in the success of LGC and its members, this research is coming from a deeply personal place. I am not just a researcher studying a community; I was embedded in this community. In the next chapter, I will discuss my methodology for conducting feminist community-engaged research from my position as the "embedded researcher" for LGC.

# Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the principles, practices, and methodologies that inform how I, as a feminist community-engaged researcher, conduct research with and about my own community. I begin with an overview of my overarching research framework (feminist community-engaged research), followed by the two ethnographic methodologies (critical ethnography and reflexive ethnography) that I draw upon to inform my research design. I then state my positionality, which includes my role as the "embedded researcher" in Lady Game Club (LGC). Following this, I discuss the key features of "feminist embedded ethnography," a community-based methodology for conducting emotionally engaged ethnographic research on a closed community. Here, the feminist embedded ethnography is envisaged as critical feminist practice, where the messiness that comes from undertaking emotional and affective feminist work is embraced as a resource for knowledge creation. I end the chapter by describing the methods I employed for data collection and analysis.

## Framework: Feminist Community-Engaged Research

This study is guided by the principles of community-engaged research. Since 2011, I have been involved in various collaborative, community-engaged social justice research projects (Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Harvey & Fisher, 2013, 2016; Fisher & Stone, 2016; Chung et. al., 2023). As community-engaged researcher, I invite community members to participate in the research process and also seek to build trust, enlist new resources and allies, and create longstanding collaborations. To this end, I seek to employ anti-oppressive methodologies that center community-based knowledge, and co-construct knowledge with participants that can advance social justice goals that ultimately benefit and advance the goals of the community.

The community that I am researching is the "women-in-games" community. This community is brought together by a shared ideal – gender equality in games – and is driven by a collective desire to create social change by supporting game makers from marginalized genders (women, non-binary, trans-women, AFAB individuals).[25] The women-in-games community is not a monolith but is spread across many organizations and institutions. As such, feminism (and feminist activism) in this community is not universally defined, but rather based on individually held beliefs on what constitutes feminism. Activism in this community takes different forms, from increasing representation to participating in labour organizing. The community is, for the most part, comprised of game makers seeking to create equitable conditions for themselves and their peers. I am a part of this community. However, I am not a game maker; I am a researcher.

As a feminist researcher, I have a responsibility to contribute my scholarly skills and expertise to advance the goals of my community, and to represent, protect, and do justice to the stories and knowledges that come from conducting research about this community. My role and responsibilities as a researcher are informed by Patti Lather's "feminist pedagogy" (1991, 2008). Feminist pedagogy is a framework that was originally developed for critical education initiatives and reconfigures traditional researcher-participant relations. It positions participants as knowledge experts and encourages researchers to problematize and explore the power relationships between researchers and communities. I incorporate the principles of feminist pedagogy - dialogue, reciprocity, and reflexivity – into my research design.

[25] In this context, marginalization refers to experiences of injustice or discrimination (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 6). As discussed in the previous chapter, gender-based harassment, exclusion, and discrimination against anyone who is not a cisgender man is normalized in games culture.

**Methodology: Critical and Reflexive Ethnography**

In this research study I draw on ethnographic methods such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews to examine this community of feminist game makers. Ethnography, as defined by Naidoo (2012), is “a qualitative methodology that lends itself to the study of the beliefs, social interactions, and behaviors of small societies, involving participation and observation over a period of time, and the interpretation of the data collected" (p.1). There is no absolute truth of interpretation in ethnography (Rosen, 1991), rather the aim of ethnography is to produce meaning for the culture under study. Ethnography is linked to the lived experience of the researcher, who, as a participant observer, is immersed in the culture over an extended period and therefore in a position to discover what is hidden (Naidoo, 2012).

Because of my leadership position within this community (as the director of a non-profit organization that is dependent on a positive image of the women-in-games community), I must always be mindful that I have a stake in how this community is being represented. Researcher reflexivity plays an integral and vital role of my research design. Researcher reflexivity is the process of continually examining our roles and positions in relation to our multifaceted contexts. For this research to be useful for advancing the social justice goals of the community specifically (and feminism more broadly), I take a critical and reflexive stance when examining my own community, and also my role as a researcher studying it. As such, my methodology is heavily informed by critical ethnography and reflexive ethnography. Both methodologies are aligned with the guiding principles of community-engaged research and foreground power relations between researcher and participants by centering researcher reflexivity and positionality.

Critical ethnographic approaches are profoundly shaped by feminist, postcolonial, Indigenous, and critical race scholarship (the common thread across these bodies of scholarship

being a highly nuanced conceptualization of power) (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2003; Tomaselli, Dyll, & Francis, 2008; Visweswaran, 2003). According to Madison (2005), critical ethnography carries an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice with a particular lived domain. The critical ethnographer takes an activist position, (Fine, 1994) and is committed to disrupting and intervening on hegemonic practices. In addition to its orientation to social justice and activism, critical ethnographers deploy the privilege, skills, and resources at their disposal to create spaces for voices that are systematically silenced, with the goal of contributing to emancipatory knowledge (Madison, 2005). Naidoo (2012) notes that critical ethnography involves writing against and denouncing injustice (Bourgeois, 2006; Chari & Donner, 2010).

Like critical ethnography, reflexive ethnography also critically analyzes the power relations and injustices that may exist in a culture, while also integrating and foregrounding researcher reflexivity into the methodological process. Here, researcher reflexivity refers to the practices and ongoing process of acting reflexively as it relates to how we navigate research (Benson & O'Reilly, 2022; Davis 2012; May & Perry, 2017). At its core, researcher reflexivity acknowledges that social researchers are inevitably tangled in networks and relationships, and the co-creation of the social world they aim to study (Benson & O'Reilly, 2022; May & Perry, 2017). It rejects the neutral position of observer and constructing objective knowledge about participants that is typically afforded through positivist frameworks for meaning making (Frisby, Maguire, & Reid, 2009; Lather, 2008; Rutman, et. al., 2005; Brown & Strega, 2005). Thus, reflexivity requires subjecting the relationship between researcher and the researched to critical and ongoing scrutiny and to consider how it shapes the knowledge produced by the research

(Benson & O'Reilly, 202[26]; Davis, 2012). The reflexive researcher must think critically about their own role or impact and on the various conditions under which the research was done. In describing the job of the reflexive ethnographer, Karen O'Reilly

writes:

> "Reflexive ethnographers think carefully about who has the power to say what about whom, and make sure that research participants (not subjects) have some influence or say over the research and how it is presented. They think carefully about what they write and read. They include some analysis of wider structures of power and control. They try to be honest about who has what influence over their work. They describe the context of the research and their place in that context, and perhaps provide some autobiographical details to help the reader understand their perspective better. They engage in conversations with research participants, rather than subjecting respondents to interviews. They learn from their own experiences, and build their analyses in interaction with the field, in an iterative-inductive way. Finally, they provide accounts that they realize are fragments, just part of a picture, fallible, and imperfect, (but still better than none)."

Reflexivity is an ongoing process and requires researchers to continually reflect on their position throughout the research. "It is not enough simply to outline positionality by writing one's autobiography at the outset of the project. To leave it at that is to undermine how positionality, as produced through relationships, continues to shape research and the production

[26] To avoid producing a completely inward-looking perspective, Davis (2012) proposes that ethnographic research be undertaken from a critical realist perspective/grounded in critical realism to avoid producing a highly individual reflexive work.

of knowledge." (Benson & O'Reilly, 2022, p.179). Critical ethnography also compels researchers to examine the positionality of the researcher in relation to community-engaged research, as noted by Dutta (2015):

> "A keystone of ethnography is the researcher's deep immersion in the community or context of inquiry. This immersion takes place in a particular sociopolitical and cultural milieu and is shaped by researchers' worldviews, values, biographies, and politics. The various intersections of these lived domains constitute the research horizon. Positionality refers to the explication of this horizon through a critical engagement with our power, privilege, biases, and insights vis-à-vis participant communities (Dutta, 2015, p.71; see also Madison, 2005).

In critical and reflexive ethnography, the researchers' position is contextualized, to make it accessible, transparent, and vulnerable to judgement and evaluation (Benson & O'Reilly, 2022; Davis, 2012; Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, Jr., 2004). In the following sections, I state my 'invested positionality' (Lather, 1991) as a feminist, community organizer and researcher. I then reflect on my position as an "embedded researcher" to illuminate how I was positioned by community members and how I think about undertaking critical feminist research from this unique position.

**My Positionality: Feminist, Researcher, Organizer**

Doing community-engaged research when you're a part of the community requires a methodological process that centers self-reflexivity - the need and necessity for the researcher to acknowledge and examine their position, and how that location permeates their inquiry at every

level (Brown & Strega, 2005). Intersectionality is useful to help examine the researcher's position. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), a legal scholar and critical race theorist, is credited with developing the concept of intersectionality to acknowledge that different forms of identity and structural oppression overlap and intersect with each other. Specific factors of identity – e.g., gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, language, education, age, etc. – allows an individual to locate themselves politically and socially. Intersectionality helps think through the complexity of our individual identities that frames the relationships that academic researchers can have with the activist communities they engage with (Collins, 2000).

The intersections I occupy shape my perspectives and the types of experiences I am able to draw on. I am a cisgender woman, which means that I am more likely to be discriminated against than a cisgender man, but less than a transwoman or someone who identifies as non-binary. I am mixed race; however, my appearance and name easily allow me to access white privilege. My education enables me to pursue employment opportunities that provide a high degree of financial security. The absence of any caregiving responsibilities allows me to spend a substantial amount of time volunteering in my community, which has, over time, led me to pursue leadership roles that come with a certain level of status within the videogame industry. My position of privilege affects and limits my perspective. It also affects how other community members engage with me, and the contributions I can make to the community.

I locate myself as a feminist researcher and community organizer. My involvement in women-in-games advocacy work over the last thirteen years has made "feminist community organizer and researcher" an inextricable part of my identity. As a researcher who is interested in social justice, I am concerned with issues of voice, representation, and collaboration in research, and producing outcomes that challenge existing power relations. My position as a researcher

affords me certain privileges that are not readily available to the game developers in my community. For example, as someone not employed within the games industry, I have the privilege of speaking critically about the industry and can openly identify as a feminist without fear of reprisal by my employer or other economic consequences.

As a researcher, it is widely understood that my professional duty is to make observations and report findings – to speak. I have always sought to create a bridge between scholarly and "everyday" feminisms and feminists in my work. For example, I strive to use the language of the community as much as possible, in both my theorizing and my writing. This way, the representations of the community remain accessible to its members and is not obscured by needless complexity. As someone who straddles the line between these spaces, I do my best to conduct my research from a position of solidarity with community members who do not occupy the privileged space of academia and see it as my responsibility to conduct research that is in service to the community – research that is both speaking with and for the silenced. I am simultaneously speaking for myself, but also for and with the community I am a part of.

As a community-based researcher who is 'on the margin' in games culture herself and conducting research within a community of other marginalized persons, a part of this research aims to develop a methodology that not only elucidates how my community has positioned (and empowered) me, but also incorporates my own lived experiences as a woman, feminist, community member, leader, and Storyteller into the research process. In the following sections, I discuss my role as the "embedded researcher" for this community, and the "Feminist Embedded Ethnography" research methodology that I developed for this study.

**The Embedded Researcher: Being a "Part of the Unit"**

The origin of the term "embedded researcher" comes from my experience participating in the Diversity in Games Initiative (DGI) program, which was designed to teach young women with no game making experience how to make a video game. In addition to making a game as part of the program, I was also tasked by the organizers to conduct a small-scale study on the outcomes of DGI program (see Fisher & Harvey, 2013). To make sense of this dual role, the other women who were participating in the program referred to me as the "embedded researcher." The embedded researcher title is based on the practice of embedded journalism,[27] where a journalist travels with military unit throughout a conflict zone for a long period of time. The embedded journalist is not considered to be separate from other military personnel. Rather, they are seen and treated as "part of the unit" and are tasked with providing a firsthand account of what is happening on the ground.

My role as the embedded researcher carried on through the intense period of community building that immediately followed the end of the DGI program and led to the creation of Lady Game Club (LGC), the community organization under study. Being the embedded researcher was how LGC community members made sense of my presence and involvement as a non-game maker in the community. As a feminist researcher conducting ethnographic research from an "embedded" position, I am conducting a "Feminist Embedded Ethnography."

[27] Embedded journalism was popularized during the US invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s and is where members of the press were given the opportunity to live with a battalion and were tasked with providing a firsthand account of military operations (Garneau & Venter, 2013).

**Feminist Embedded Ethnography**

Feminist Embedded Ethnography is a research methodology that centers my position as the LGC "embedded researcher." This methodology is informed by the principles of critical and reflexive ethnography discussed above (e.g. taking an activist stance, the duty to write about injustice, and centering researcher reflexivity and positionality) and also incorporates community-based understandings of my role as a feminist embedded researcher. Developing this methodology is part of my practice as critical and reflexive ethnographer. I'm not just stating my positionality; I am creating a methodology that draws on and centers my community-based identity and role as the embedded researcher. Furthermore, developing a community-informed methodology not only elucidates my unique 'embedded' position within this community to scholarly audiences, but also honors the community by incorporating community-based knowledge and language into my scholarly work.

A key feature of feminist embedded ethnography is researcher reciprocity. While I did not aspire to work in the games industry, I was heavily involved in LGC in other ways. As the embedded researcher of the community, I conducted research on LGC's game making programs, spoke on behalf of the organization at scholarly and industry conferences, acted as a liaison between the community and academia, provided LGC with access to university equipment and other resources, shared my expertise on the topics of DIY game making and game-based learning. I also collaborated on other research projects happening in the LGC community (in addition to this dissertation research) and sought to document the stories of feminist activism happening within the LGC community through my dissertation research. Part of researcher reciprocity involves using my position to challenge existing power relations. As a researcher, I have the power to bring attention to and raise awareness about the issues that are affecting my

community; not only to scholarly and industry audiences (outsiders), but perhaps more importantly, to the community itself.

Being a feminist embedded ethnographer comes with a responsibility to speak truth to power on behalf of those tell me their stories. When an individual from a vulnerable community shares a deeply personal narrative with you for the purpose of constructing knowledge, it is accompanied by an obligation to re-tell this story, to share this information with others in a way that is respectful of the storyteller, and their community (Haig-Brown & Dannenmann, 2002). The Storytellers are my friends and peers, and they trust me with documenting their experiences.

### *Trust in a Closed Community*

Long-standing responsibility and accountability play an important role in conducting community-engaged research. The embedded researcher position is a privileged position that enabled me to conduct research on and with a community that was, at this time, closed off to outsiders for multiple reasons, such as research fatigue and personal safety. For example, some Storytellers experienced wariness when engaging in academic research. During interviews from the small-scale DGI study (Fisher & Harvey, 2013), the Storytellers from that study remarked how they felt "over researched"[28] (and even misrepresented) and that their labour did not result in any direct benefits back to the community:

> "I kind of have this suspicion of researchers and academics, no offense…because, you know, when we're interviewed we're asked to do a lot of work, like you know

[28] In the early 2010s, "getting more women into tech and games" was an emerging topic of scholarly interest. As the only women-in-games organization in Toronto, LGC was a popular location for researchers to recruit research participants.

> organizing thoughts and emotional work, talking about our experiences and disclosing, and then it's kind of like *boom* you have what you need and then you go and write your paper, and it goes up into the ivory tower and whatever, and then it's like, 'Great, how does that help us at all?' And so, I think if you hadn't participated, Stephanie, in the first incubator, then that kind of good will wouldn't have been built up as much. Just the fact that you could relate to what we were going through was really important, and I think it built up a lot of good will then for Alison to come in and not participate but still come in and sit in on the sessions."

This quote exemplifies the skepticism and hesitation expressed by individuals who belong to marginalized groups[29] in participating in academic research, which they perceived as labour intensive with little benefit to them.

In addition to research fatigue, this study takes place at a time when women were not only fighting the everyday sexism that prevented their full and equal participation in games and tech spaces, but also during Gamergate, when feminism and feminists in games were literally under attack by those who sought to keep women out of these spaces. During Gamergate, scholarly interest in studying this new "culture war" (Alexander, 2014a; Goldberg & Larsson, 2015) surged, which resulted in women-in-games communities to close ranks to outsiders even more. Because of this, my embedded researcher position became even more important to be able to undertake this study. The high level of trust between me and the Storytellers enables them to

[29] Given the historical context of scholarly researchers either misrepresenting or taking advantage of certain marginalized communities (e.g., Tuskegee syphilis study), it is understandable why individuals from these communities hold attitudes of mistrust towards researchers and would be reluctant to participate in academic research.

share personal feelings and intimate stories from a position of vulnerability, and this is not something I take for granted.

**Reconfiguring Traditional Research Relationships**

Another key feature of feminist embedded ethnography is that it challenges the strict roles of "researcher/outsider" and "participant/insider" that define traditional ethnography and the researchers' role as merely a "participant-observer." Unlike a traditional ethnographer who enters a community and then leaves it after the research is done, I was already a part of this community before I started my dissertation research and continue to be a part of it today.[30] The feminist embedded ethnographer blurs the boundaries between researcher and participant, where I am a researcher and organizer and activist and participant all at the same time. I am entangled in the activist, professional, and personal lives of the people I interview for this study. I do not see them as "research participants," but as peer Storytellers.

Collaborative, feminist, ethnographic research can be a "difficult, messy, fraught, emotional [and] tiring" process (Skeggs, 1994). There is an undeniable emotional dimension to this research study. I am interviewing women who I consider to be not only colleagues and collaborators, but also personal friends who I formed close relationships with. I bonded with them over the good and bad. I observed and participated in emotionally charged situations. I witnessed arguments and disagreements, as well as the collapse of personal and professional relationships (temporary and permanent). Storytellers' accounts contradict each other, and my

[30] Within Sociology, the term "intragroup differentiation" is used to describe the division of a group into subgroups and different functions within the group without being superior or inferior to each other. I prefer to use the term "embedded" because this term was given to me by my community and therefore holds meaning. As a feminist researcher, I incorporate the language of the community into my writing as much as possible as a way to honour the Storytellers and to make my research accessible to them and other non-scholarly feminist communities.

own recollections and experiences have also been challenged. I am mindful that as the feminist embedded ethnographer, I am not writing the story of LGC solely from my perspective, but the stories that the Storytellers have entrusted me to tell. I embrace the messiness of this collaborative feminist research and lean into the affective and emotional nature of activist work.

### *Emotionally Engaged Feminist Researcher*

In addition to critical and reflexive ethnography, feminist embedded ethnography is also informed by Kristin Blakely's (2007) concept of the "emotionally engaged feminist researcher." The emotionally engaged researcher is a post-structuralist feminist position that challenges objectivity and "the possibility of accessing truth" (Weedon, 1999, p.4). There is a rich history of feminist scholarship that addresses the emotional aspects of research and knowledge production. Jaggar (1997) argues that normative academic frameworks tend to obscure the vital role of emotion and affect in the production of knowledge. Feminist methodologies trouble the binary which "separates emotion from intellect" (Collins, 2000, p. 282) and often encourages researchers to use their emotional selves as a research tool to attend to and analyze emotion, interpret and select data, and build rapport with research participants (Collins 2000; Lee 1993; Oakley 1981; Sampson, Bloor, & Fincham 2008). Blakley (2007) builds on this work and proposes that exploring the emotional experiences of doing research can be a productive and meaningful project for feminist scholars as it can help to foster intellectual clarity and a deeper understanding of the issues being studied.

Emotionally engaged research involves recognizing that we as researchers are operating within imperfect settings and studies. Our research is and can only ever be partial in its outcomes and understanding of the research participants and subject itself. The emotionally engaged

researcher rejects the positivist fallacies of objectivity, value neutrality, and emotional detachment. I am emotionally attached to the Storytellers through our shared experiences of making games, building the LGC community, and engaging in feminist activism. Instead of attempting to create the illusion of researcher objectivity or neutrality, I embrace my affective attachments to the Storytellers and the emotional aspects of this research a powerful resource for data collection and analysis.

## Methods

### *Storyteller Care and Consent*

This research is guided by a broad understanding of caring,[31] where caring simply means "an emotional connection and concern for an issue, person, or persons" (Campbell, 2001). Examples of this type of caring include caring for the research issue, the research participants, the researcher, and what becomes of the research. As I have stated many times throughout this dissertation, I care deeply about the wellbeing and happiness of the Storytellers, about LGC, the women-in-games community at large, and broader issues related to gender-equity and inclusivity in games. My experiences conducting community-engaged feminist research across multiple sites over the years has taught me the importance of practicing an ethics of care when conducting research with and about individuals who you form extremely close relationships with. All Storytellers signed an informed consent document to participate in this research, but I view

[31] Blakely (2007) notes that this broad understanding of caring is important as a departure from previous interpretations of "caring" in research relationships within feminist methodology. Reinharz (1993) called reciprocity, empathy, rapport, mutuality, and others "excessive demands" (p. 72) on feminist researchers. They are methodological myths about non-hierarchical research relationships that pose unrealistic, mostly impossible expectations on researchers.

consent as an ongoing process. Throughout the research process, I checked in regularly with Storytellers to gauge their comfort on sharing their experiences with me and reminded them they could revoke consent at any time without having to explain why.

I include care for myself as part of this ethics of care. I took a break from my dissertation research that lasted just over five years (from September 2016 to January 2022). The Storytellers understood the difficulties I was experiencing at the time and were empathetic to my struggles in trying to analyze and write up our experiences in a women-in-games community during a time when 'outspoken feminists' in games were being targeted for online harassment. Giving myself this time and space enabled me to reflect on my own position and experiences at LGC as well as work through the messy entanglements that came with the role doing feminist embedded ethnography.

### *Data Collection: Participant-Observation and Interviews*

In this study I collected data through participant-observation and conducting semi-structured interviews with Storytellers. As part of my longtime involvement as the embedded researcher for this community, I have amassed a LGC "private archive" (Fletcher, 2018) of participant-observation data that was collected between 2011-2015. This archive includes researcher fieldnotes, personal journals, publicly available documents (e.g., Annual General Meeting minutes, blog posts), photos, and various types of correspondence (e.g., newsletters, emails, direct messages). The interviews for this study were conducted with thirteen Storytellers between 2014-15. There were eight interviews in total, each lasting between 60-90 minutes. Storytellers had the option to be interviewed individually or as part of a group. For the group interviews, the Storytellers chose who they wanted to be interviewed with so they would feel

comfortable to speak freely. Some Storytellers requested to be interviewed multiple times (e.g., as an individual, and as part of a group). Storytellers chose the interview location. Examples of interview locations include Storytellers homes, private study rooms at a local library, restaurants and coffee shops. Storytellers received an honorarium as a token of appreciation for participating in the interview. The interviews were audio recorded using two devices (my mobile phone and a laptop). I used two recording devices as a failsafe, just in case one of the recordings stopped without warning or the audio was distorted or unclear. All interviews were transcribed by me and subsequently checked over by Storytellers, who could amend or provide clarification if necessary.

Feminist theory has developed around the central idea of creating conditions for the marginalized to speak for themselves. As a feminist researcher, I attempt to create conditions where marginalized voices may be heard. The interviews were framed as an opportunity for Storytellers to reflect on and speak about their experiences at LGC, as well as feminist activism in games and the larger women-in-games community in general. The interviews were semi-structured so Storytellers could exercise agency within a research project that gives them the opportunity to speak about potentially uncomfortable topics or experiences. A preliminary question list was distributed to Storytellers prior to the interviews and were also available to look at during the interview. The questions were exploratory and centered on Storytellers' personal feminist philosophies and practices (i.e., how they understand themselves and their work/practice as feminist), their participation in LGC, and how their feminism was enacted and represented in the context of LGC and wider women-in-games community. These questions served as suggested topics for discussion and were not strictly adhered to. The Storytellers controlled the flow and direction of the conversation and decided when to end the interview.

### *Who are the Storytellers?*

The Storytellers in this study are game makers who identified as feminists and were members of LGC. The women-in-games community in Toronto is a very small community, therefore, to protect the privacy and anonymity of the Storytellers, I have chosen not to include granular details about their professional identities or include an appendix with any identifiable information. During the time of the interviews (2014-15), the Storytellers were women and non-binary individuals all under the age of 35, born in North America and currently living in Toronto. When asked if they identified with any marginalized groups, six self-identified as belonging to a visible minority, two as queer, two as low-income, and one as living with a disability. As a group, the Storytellers shared a certain level of socioeconomic status and class privilege. They had all completed secondary school, and their post-secondary education ranged from college diplomas to graduate degrees. Eight Storytellers were engaged in freelance or contract work, three were full-time employees at a game studio, and two were employed full-time outside of the games industry.

### *Coding and Data Analysis*

The interviews were thematically coded twice. The interviews were first coded in 2015 using the beta-version of a program called Field Guide. Field Guide is user-testing software meant to assist UX design teams in collecting user-research data. The reason I chose to use Field Guide was because the software was developed by a member of LGC, who was working in software development at this time. I could have used coding software for qualitative data analysis like NVivo or Noldus, however beta-testing Field Guide with a large data set enabled me to provide feedback to the Storyteller on the tool in a way that would be a benefit to her

professionally. In other words, by being a participant in the beta-testing of Field Guide and providing feedback to her, I was engaging in researcher reciprocity. My use of Field Guide was not motivated out of a sense of obligation, but rather the genuine wish to support the professional goals of LGC community members.

Although Field Guide was not to be used by academics or social scientist researchers, the program's key features made it particularly useful to transcribe and code interviews. For example, there is feature built into the note-taking component that makes it easier for the user to identify and record when software issues (i.e. bugs) occur during a user-testing session. This feature allowed me to both identify and generate new codes on the fly, which would automatically be added to the master list. Using hashtags (#), I was able to create codes while transcribing and these would appear in the body of the text. This was particularly useful, because it effectively combined the work of transcribing and coding. Additionally, Field Guide automatically produces a summary report for each interview transcript, and there is an option to generate additional reports based on codes used. For example, I could generate a report that would export all the sections/clips coded with "race" or "class." The software was installed locally onto my laptop and not connected to the cloud, guaranteeing privacy and security of the research data.

As described above, I developed a preliminary list of codes while transcribing the interviews using Field Guide. This initial code list was based on broad categories related to feminism, game making, tech/games industry and culture, and community building. After the transcripts were reviewed and approved by the Storytellers, I applied the codes to the interview data. During the first round of coding, I listened to the interview audio while reading and coding the approved transcripts, generating more codes as I engaged more deeply with the interview

data. This is when I started to generate codes that would capture the emotional dimension of the interviews.

Discussing their experiences within LGC, the impact of LGC in their personal and professional lives, and their own feminist practices was often an emotional experience for the Storytellers. Emotions are an untapped resource of information that can lend insight into the research process and the production of knowledge (Blakely, 2007). During the coding process, I generated codes to mark these emotional and affective expressions (e.g., joy, embarrassment, anger, frustration, disappointment, relief, guilt) as they talked about their investments, attachments, passions, and resentments. I had completed the coding process when I decided to take a break from my dissertation research, which lasted for five years (2016-2022).

When I returned from my break, I reviewed the transcripts and performed a secondary round of coding in 2023. I was unable to use Field Guide on my new laptop, so I opted to use the exported "field reports" instead and code manually. These field reports are the full interview transcript that also highlights blocks of text (quotes) where codes were applied. For this round of coding, I specifically focused on applying emotional codes to the transcripts. My rationale for focusing on these parts of the interviews was that these emotional moments were a sign that the Storytellers were sharing something that was significant to them, and therefore worthy of further attention and analysis. Reviewing the interviews seven years later, with time and distance away from the messiness of feminist community building, enabled me to apply a reflective lens to the interview data and see a bigger picture emerging from this subset of coded moments. By narrowing my focus on the emotional coded data, I was able to identify four larger overarching themes running through the interviews. These four themes represent and map onto the key

systemic oppressions that Storytellers experienced while in participating in LGC: patriarchy, race, class, and professionalism.

### *Analysis: LGC Storytellers' Emotional Experiences*

I use the Storytellers' emotional experiences of participating in LGC as an entry point for exploring and pulling apart the feminist logics of the LGC platform. [32] The mission of LGC was to support women game makers who are in search of community and are struggling to belong in the games-tech space. In my analysis, I highlight the tensions between the Storytellers and the design of LGC to document the messiness of feminist activism in games spaces during this time. I also apply an intersectional feminist lens to my analysis. Following the work of Black and women of colour feminist thinkers who call for a representation of women that considers the reality of intersectionality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1989), [33] I take into account the Storytellers' multiple intersections of identity and differences to demonstrate how there is not a simple, homogenous gendered identity that we could call "women" struggling to be equal with men. In doing so, I minimize the risk of valorizing sisterhood and universalizing all women as a single entity (hooks, 2000, 2015; McCall, 2005). As a Storyteller myself, I also weave my own experiences into the analysis. I reflect on and write about my experiences in LGC from an

[32] This research not only documents the visible expressions of feminism at LGC (i.e., what's visible to anyone looking at LGC from the outside), but also the invisible feminist practices and the tensions that are felt by those on the inside. "Inside" here refers to both my 'insider position' as an embedded ethnographer who is telling the story from within the organization, and the Storytellers' emotions that are felt within their bodies when talking about their experiences (e.g. anxiety, annoyance, anger, exasperation, excitement, exhaustion, disappointment, fear, frustration, pride, joy, gratitude).

[33] Intersectionality, a theory of the interconnectedness of social categorization by Kimberle Crenshaw, stresses the compounding nature of discrimination against those who occupy multiple minoritized social categories. Crenshaw (1989) examines Black women's encounters with the legal system to illustrate how treating those who are subject to sexism and racism as discrete erases the experience of those who are marginalized across multiple axes of power.

empowered position, which has also allowed me to introduce a level of frankness in my stories that comes with time and distance away from the events.

**Documenting Feminist History**

This research is feminist in the way that it seeks to challenge and disrupt the conceptual norms of rational, distanced, and objective scholarly knowledge production. Feminist embedded ethnography is informed by post-structural and feminist theories, following scholars like Letherby (2003), who stress that "it is not the use of a particular method of methods which characterizes a researcher or project as feminist, but the way in which the method(s) are used" (p. 81). By analysing the experiences of game makers through the intimate perspective that "embedding" provides, this study contributes an in-depth understanding of community-based feminist action in a particular time and space and offers a new approach for conducting critical inquiry on feminist activism in games culture and industry – one that conventional ethnographic research cannot capture. By embracing the emotional and affective nature of this research, I am working both within and against disciplinary conventions to do justice to what Lather (2008) describes as "methodological economies of responsibility and possibility that engage our will to know through concrete efforts both to produce different knowledge and to produce knowledge differently" (Lather, 2008, p. 200).

Although this is not a historical study, one of the contributions of this study is that it analyses feminist narratives to document a feminist history. Feminist embedded ethnography produces details and perspectives that would otherwise be forgotten. It provides scholarly audiences with an understanding of the issues facing feminist community organizations from the perspective of those who were building and participating in theses spaces. Although LGC is a

small part of the larger feminism in games movement, it is connected to and representative of the broader issues at stake within feminism and techno-capitalism at this moment. That being said, I do not seek to provide an objective or authoritative account about this community or produce findings that are generalizable to the larger women-in-games community. I do not seek to iron out the inconsistencies that emerges from the messiness of feminist research or disentangle the complex relationships between Storytellers to uncover or distill an essential "truth" about feminist activism in games. By documenting the stories and history of a women-in-games organization from the perspectives of its community members, this study offers a partial, fragmented, narrow slice of what feminism in games community building and activism looked liked at a particular time and place.

## Chapter 5: Analysis: Feminist Games Spaces for Marginalized Game Makers

In this chapter, I examine the feminist "social justice" aspects of LGC. Drawing on the Storytellers' experiences with sexism, racism, and classism at LGC, I analyze how LGC both creates a safe space for marginalized game makers but is also designed to reinforce the existing dominant social hierarchies that work to keep marginalized groups out of games and tech spaces.

### A Safe Space for Marginalized Game Makers

LGC was, unequivocally, a women-centered games space that provided an alternative to the other local games industry and community spaces, which were (and still are) filled with and dominated by men. As discussed in Chapter 2, games spaces can be unfriendly to women in a myriad of ways. In games industry and community spaces, marginalized people expect to encounter overt expressions and displays of sexism, racism, and homophobia. Storytellers shared stories of the bullying, exclusion, and harassment that they had experienced, both in the past (as a 'girl gamer' growing up) and the present (as a woman game maker). These negative experiences in games spaces were a shared, common experience between Storytellers, and the main reason why they chose to participate in the LGC community in the first place. The organization was (and still is) the first and only women-focused games community in Ontario, and women from all over the Greater Toronto Area came to participate in LGC activities (e.g., one Storyteller lived in a city that was a two-hour drive from Toronto). One Storyteller fondly described LGC as a kind of "clubhouse" where women who were interested in learning more about making games could gather and socialize.

The importance of having a designated space and community for women game makers to gather cannot be understated. LGC was established in the time period right before Gamergate,

when instances of toxic masculinity and popular misogyny in games were becoming more frequent and prevalent made the creation of "women only" or "women-centered" game spaces a necessary step for creating a more inclusive games culture and industry. Game makers from underrepresented groups needed places where they could gather and be free from the stereotypes and marginalization that permeate other 'regular' games (and societal) spaces (Myers, Trull, Bryson, & Yeom, 2019). Creating a safe space[34] for marginalized game makers was seen as an act of resistance that also enabled women to come together for support and healing, and this was a significant part of LGC's mission and identity as a feminist organization. LGC promoted itself as a community where marginalized game makers were free from being treated like an outsider or subjected to discrimination and harassment they experienced in other spaces.

The safety of LGC members was upheld through policies such as the Safe Space policy and a Code of Conduct. These are policies that, at the time, were not as common as they are today. The Safe Space policy and Code of Conduct removed any doubts about what constituted harassment and clearly outlined the consequences for violating these rules (e.g. removal from the event, membership revoked). The Code of Conduct named specific behaviours that were deemed unacceptable. There was zero-tolerance for sexual harassment (e.g. comments or jokes about sex, sexuality, or body parts), physical harassment (e.g., unwanted physical contact or violence), verbal harassment (e.g. threats, slurs or other offensive language), and other behaviours that could be considered overt displays of sexism, racism, or homophobia. Violation of these policies could result in temporary or permanent removal from the event, program, or even the LGC community.

[34] While it is impossible to create a space or community that is 100% free from harm, I use 'safe space' because 1) that is the terminology used by LGC, and 2) as told by the Storytellers, LGC's hard reduction efforts made the space significantly safer to be in than the other game spaces at this time.

By outlining clear consequences for breaking rules, the Safe Space policy and Code of Conduct achieved several things: 1) it acknowledged that these things do happen in games spaces and that women would be believed and not dismissed, 2) the organizational response removed the individual burden of having to deal with harassment alone (women were not left to deal with harassment by themselves). However, by focusing on harassment and other overt displays of bigotry and discrimination, the Code of Conduct worked to frame oppression not as systemic, but as caused by the actions of a few bad apples. By equating sexism and racism with harassment, which are overt and observable acts that are perpetrated by individuals, oppressions are framed as being caused by individuals. Therefore, sexism and racism can be fought and eliminated from a space through removal of the offending individuals (or, put another way, creating a space free from sexism and racism can be achieved simply by removing the sexists and racists). Oppression was equated with overt and observable abusive behaviors (e.g., bullying and harassment) rather than something that is systemic and can be reproduced in less visible ways. But, as Ruha Benjamin (2019) argues, oppressions are built in – they are not 'bugs', but 'features' of the system. In the sections that follow, I demonstrate how different systems of oppression are built into the structure of LGC and invisibly organize the space, and how they end up reinforcing the existing, dominant social hierarchies (gender, race, and class) that work to keep marginalized groups out of games.

**Gender Hierarchies**

Although it was an organization that supported women-game makers, LGC was not a women-only space. In this section, I examine how men were positioned and participated in the

LGC community to elucidate how the design of LGC reinforced and naturalized patterns of patriarchal dominance that are seen in games/tech spaces at large.

### *Positioning Men as Allies and Mentors*

When LGC introduced their membership model in late 2012, there were two categories: "Witch," which was as intended for women who were novice game makers, and "Wizard," which was a catch-all membership for anyone who did not identify as a woman, and "intended for members of the community with more experience." Through the Wizard category, men could become members of LGC, either by paying a monthly membership fee, or by volunteering for the organization as a mentor. Depending on the type of program they helped with, mentors received between six-months to one-year of Wizard membership for free.

The membership model reflects the gender binary, where women are "Witches" and "Wizards" are men. The Wizard category was flexible enough so it could be possible for women to choose this membership if they wanted, however the Witch category was reserved exclusively for women, leaving only one membership option for men. Moreover, the Wizard membership category explicitly labels these members as "allies." LGC was an explicitly feminist and women-focused organization. The ally label that is applied to Wizard members further suggests that those who sign up for the Wizard category of membership are men, who are "allies" of feminists.

The membership categories were also linked to technical knowledge. Under this scheme, Wizards are 'experienced' game makers and Witches are 'learners' or novice game makers. LGC's programs focused on teaching women to make games, and they relied on volunteer mentors to help do this teaching work. Men could receive a free Wizard membership by providing mentorship services (see Appendix C for an explanation of the LGC membership

model and mentorship program). By offering membership in exchange for volunteer labour, LGC created large pool of men to serve as mentors for programs. There were more men volunteering as mentors than women volunteering as mentors at LGC. For example, out of the ten mentors for a July 2012 incubator program, only two were women while the other eight were men.[35] It was not lack of game making skills or technical knowledge that prevented women from taking on mentorship roles. For example, the two women mentors from the July 2012 program were still very new to game making themselves but were still confident enough in their skills to help other women learn to make a game. Rather, Storytellers talked about how their various responsibilities (e.g., caregiving) meant they did not have a lot of spare time to go towards mentoring or volunteering at LGC in general (Winn & Heeter, 2009).

By looking at the design of the mentorship program, we can better understand how boys and men come to dominate and outnumber women in games/tech spaces in the first place. Boys and men have significantly less obligations and responsibilities competing for their time (Lloyd, Grant, & Ritchie, 2008), and this is time that they can spend tinkering and learning how to make games, which they are encouraged to do so starting at a young age (Winn & Heeter, 2009). In contrast, adult women have less leisure time than men, and the free time they do have is available in smaller chunks than adult males (Mattingly & Bianchi 2003). Furthermore, the design of the LGC mentorship program is based on a postfeminist premise that men and women having equal access to leisure time. This does not consider the realities and gendered societal expectations that are still placed on women (Aguiar & Hurst, 2006; Eagly & Wood, 2012, 2016; Winn & Heeter, 2009). For example, girls and women are expected to still perform the majority of domestic and caregiving responsibilities in a household on top of pursuing their career

[35] This ratio also mirrors the gender demographics of the games industry workforce, which was 80% men and 20% women at that time (Weststar & Legault, 2014).

ambitions (Dush, Yavorsky, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2018; Fuwa, 2004; Greenstein, 2020). Neoliberal feminism frames taking on these domestic responsibilities as a choice – women are choosing to have it all, and they choose how to spend their free time. If there is an absence of women mentors, it is because they are choosing not to be there.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that having men be mentors at LGC was a negative thing. In fact, many Storytellers reported having positive relationships with these mentors, who they also considered friends and peers. LGC was designed in a way where men's involvement as mentors was an essential part of the organization's operations, and the way that men were automatically categorized as "knowledgeable mentors" worked to reinforce gendered stereotypes. By making the membership options a binary and linking the categories to technical skills and competencies (Witch = women-identified learners and Wizard = mentors), and giving men only one option for membership, the membership/mentorship model reinforces stereotypes of men's natural technical competencies, which also places men (mentors/teachers) in a default position of power and authority over women (mentees/learners). Instead of designing a mentorship program that acknowledged the barriers that prevented women from taking on mentorship roles, LGC accepted the status quo and defaulted to program design that allowed men to step into these roles. This reinforces the existing gender hierarchies of tech spaces, where men occupy positions of authority, even in women-centered spaces.

### *Men's Right to Access Tech Spaces: LGC Events*

In addition to acting as mentors, men would also attend LGC social events such as the monthly speaker series, networking events, arcades and showcases. LGC events were socials that revolved around promoting and highlighting women game makers. Events were free and

open to the public, providing women game makers an opportunity to talk about their games to a wider audience. As LGC grew in popularity, it was noticeable that more men were attending social events. Men's motives and intentions for attending LGC's events were not always clear to the Storytellers, and this is best exemplified by the following excerpt from a group interview. The context is that the Storytellers were discussing a recent LGC event that featured a tech-demo of a new VR headset. The event stood out because it had drawn a large crowd of men, which was unusual for a LGC event, and this led to a discussion about men's participation in LGC in general:

> Storyteller Z: "I believe that the sexes are equal, and everyone should be treated as equal. Men can also be feminists."
>
> Storyteller Y: "Yeah. But what are their reasons for being here? Are they here because they want to challenge gender norms? What's their intention for being in this space? Are you aware of how much space you take up? Are you mindful of your actions while in this space? For example, when asking a question in Q&A, are you actually curious? or are you just bringing attention to yourself."
>
> Storyteller R: "Men also feel they have right to be in any space as men. They don't have to work their way into it or prove themselves."
>
> Storyteller N: "The main reason I am here [at LGC] is because it's the only place

where I'm not outnumbered by men. This is our space. They have every other space."

Storyteller M: "I think it's actually kind of cool that more men are coming out to LGC because they're interested in the oculus rift. Because it shows they're just interested in the work and not who is speaking".

The Storytellers discussion about men's inclusion at LGC encapsulates the diverse perspectives about men's participation in feminism broadly, and women-centered tech spaces specifically. Storyteller Z's statement that gender equality had been achieved, and thus talking about it was no longer relevant is an example of the type of postfeminist discourse that was so prevalent at LGC. Storytellers Y and R express a critical feminism that seeks to challenge the gender order and encourages critical self-reflection of one's privilege by those who belong to a dominant group. Storyteller R's point about men feeling like they have the 'right' to any space is especially true for tech and game spaces. Storyteller N's disappointment in having their space 'taken away' is immediately soothed by Storyteller M, who very optimistically frames the inclusion of men in women's spaces as a good thing for the organization (popular feminism trying to stay positive!).

Although they express diverse perspectives, the Storytellers' discussion is based on two shared premises. The first is that men's participation in a games/tech space is expected and inevitable – even in women's spaces. This is also echoed by Storyteller G during their interview: "any local Toronto event with the word 'game' in it will bring out the white beardies" (white beardies was her shorthand description for the typical male game developer – white men with

beards). Men's dominance in this industry is the 'natural' order of things (Miltner, 2019), and men's right to access games/tech spaces is upheld, regardless of their reasons for being there. The second premise is that there is a place for men in the feminist movement. Black feminist thinkers like bell hooks have long argued that women's liberation requires solidarity and allyship from all patriarchy affected groups (hooks, 2000; 2015). At the time of this group discussion (in 2014), men's support and participation in feminism was becoming a part of contemporary popular feminist discourse. For example, as part of her appointment as UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, celebrity actor Emma Watson had just launched the "He for She" campaign, which called upon men to "step forward, to be seen to speak up, to be the 'he' for 'she'" (Watson, 2014, np.) Men were showing up at LGC supposedly in support of women game makers. Taking into consideration that a pool of men volunteers also provided much needed mentorship labour as part of LGC's programming (discussed in the previous section), it became important to not alienate the men who showed up to LGC events.

The logic that a bigger, more visible, and more widely attended organization is somehow advantageous is flawed. It works to maintains men's comfort and access to all tech spaces (the status quo of the games industry), and comes at the expense of the needs, desires, and dreams of women game makers to have their own space. Men's privileged position and unrestricted participation in LGC symbolizes the ongoing patriarchal project of controlling techno-capitalist spaces, as well as controlling women's freedom and movement outside of domestic spaces.

### *No Killjoys: LGC is not a place for "angry" feminism*

Storytellers' discussion about men's participation at LGC illustrated the tensions at play in this space. Tech spaces need to make room for women, but marginalized groups also need

their own spaces too. Feminism seeks to achieve gender equality (women's liberation), but it requires solidarity between all patriarchy affected individuals, including men, to challenge structural inequities and liberation from systems of oppression. Popular feminism allows LGC to be both a tech-space for marginalized people and a feminist space where men are comfortable. It is a happy feminism that does not offend or challenge patriarchal norms.

Popular feminism is an uplifting feminism, and decidedly not what Sara Ahmed has called being a 'feminist killjoy' (2010). As the only explicitly feminist games space in Toronto, critiques of patriarchy, sexism and women's oppression in society at large did happen at LGC, albeit not in an "angry" way. Game makers received immense support for creating and talking about "feminist games" – games as creative interactive media that can critique systems of oppression (Schoemann, 2021). For example, one of the games that was created through one of the incubator programs was about a driven young career woman trying to "have it all" and stomping on all her chances of reproductive success in the process (the player navigates around an office while stomping on babies and avoiding other stereotypical barriers to career success). It was described by the creator as a "feminist commentary on patriarchal capitalism" and met with enthusiastic cheers and roaring laughter from the audience during her presentation. This game maker's humorous presentation style conveys how the tech industry is a deeply sexist space, but she's also made it fun and happy. Feminisms that are friendly and accommodating to patriarchy are legible and amplified by the LGC platform, whereas feminisms that were aggressive were shut down.

The Storytellers' group discussion also demonstrates how LGC did not support critiques of oppression that were expressions of "angry" feminism. In another part of the group interview, the Storytellers discussed LGC's capacity to support radical, anti-capitalist feminist action.

During this discussion, Storyteller A suggested that "maybe [LGC] should stop paying men", to which Storyteller B immediately responded in a scolding tone that Storyteller A's suggestion was the "kind of angry feminism that makes feminist a bad word and gives feminism a bad name." Storyteller B's comment is an example of the postfeminist discourse that circulates throughout LGC, and this exchange between Storytellers A and B demonstrate how structural understandings of oppressions are at odds with the popular and postfeminist logics of LGC, which are focused on the individual.

When Storyteller A suggests they stop paying men, she is commenting on the system of patriarchal capitalism. Men are affected by patriarchy, but they are not oppressed by it in the same way that women are (hooks, 2000), and her comment is based on that understanding. In other words, Storyteller A frames oppression as intersectional and structural. But Storyteller A's suggestion to stop paying men is interpreted as punitive towards individual men by Storyteller B, who dismisses the suggestion as "angry" feminism that has no place at LGC. Storyteller B's chastisement can be seen as an attempt to discipline Storyteller A into becoming the kind of ideal postfeminist subject that is favoured by LGC; someone who does not make the men who participate in LGC uncomfortable. It is through popular and postfeminism that men's comfort in women-centered spaces like LGC is secured and maintained. Storytellers talked about how even if they wanted to question the motives and intentions of men who were in an explicitly feminist political space, they felt that it would be rude (even aggressive or offensive) to ask and possibly give feminism a "bad name". Women game makers simply had to accept that men were going to be in their spaces, and not be killjoys about it.

### *Patterns of Paternalism: The LGC Dad*

Normalizing gender hierarchies and accommodating patriarchal norms (e.g., not being rude or questioning men's access to and comfort within women's spaces) extended to the organizational level and was reflected in the relationship between LGC and Takoyaki Studio, the coworking space that housed LGC. The relationship between LGC and Takoyaki was not a collaboration between two equal and independently run organizations, but rather a paternalistic relationship where a larger organization (Takoyaki) acts on behalf of the smaller organization (LGC) for the supposed benefit of the smaller organization. This paternalistic structure was further reflected and reinforced by the privileged position that was occupied by the "LGC Dad."

Storytellers talked about the heavy involvement of the Takoyaki co-founder (who was a white, heterosexual, middle-aged cis-man and referred to by some Storytellers as the LGC Dad, both seriously and mockingly) in the organization. Dad positioned himself as a de facto mentor to all LGC members, taking a particular interest in helping out new members, who he took under his wing. Several Storytellers talked about how Dad would invite them and other members out for ice cream or coffee and talk about their future in the games industry. He was well connected and knowledgeable about indie game business development and often became involved in the professional lives of LGC members who wanted to pursue game making.

Dad also attended private LGC committee meetings and Board Meetings despite not having an official role within the organization, and Storytellers described his presence and oversight over LGC activities as "inappropriate," "awkward," "intrusive," and "silencing." Dad had a permanent seat at the decision-making table (both literally and figuratively). When questioned about it, LGC organizers explained that Dad was "helping." Storytellers' criticism regarding Dad's involvement in LGC's operations was downplayed or dismissed by himself and

the LGC organizers, and Storytellers also talked about being "scolded" for questioning Dad's intentions and made to feel "ungrateful." There was a feeling amongst the Storytellers that they were also expected to show respect and gratitude to Dad. One Storyteller spoke about how she strategically ended her business relationship with him by "breaking up" with Dad in a public space "with witnesses present," presenting him with a houseplant as a token of her gratitude.

Although I am not a game maker, I also experienced Dad's paternalism while I was the Fundraising and Sponsorships Co-Director for LGC. Even though I was in the highest position of authority at LGC (as a co-director and Board member), I had to run programming decisions through Dad for his approval and relied on him for access to basic information about LGC's finances. For example, I was organizing a fundraising program, but I did not have access to the account where the funds were being deposited. If I wanted to know how much had been raised, I either had to ask Dad for this information or check on the LGC website to see how far the needle had moved up along the fundraising goal (which was also updated by Dad). This is one example of how my experience as a Co-Director at LGC was undermined by Dad, and when I brought this to the attention of the Executive Director (who was also Dad's romantic partner and a co-founder of Takoyaki Studio), she told me that Dad's oversight and control of LGC's finances was in the best interest of the organization because it was too complicated for someone without experience running a non-profit to understand.[36] Although I was not an expert in this area, I had enough financial knowledge and experience in organizing a program to not require this level of oversight. Moreover, the reluctance to train me in these 'complicated' non-profit financial matters felt at odds with the organization's message of women's empowerment. Dad was truly the person in charge, and my position as a Co-Director at LGC felt little more than ceremonial. It

[36] I am currently the Finance co-director of a women in games non-profit organization and have been for the last 9 years. Non-profit finances are no more complicated than personal finances. Anyone can learn these skills.

was this feeling of powerlessness and lack of autonomy that ultimately led me to step down from the Co-Director position. Because it's difficult to feel empowered when you have to ask for permission.

### *Reproducing Patriarchy within LGC*

In summary, LGC was a women-centered space that protected women from overt displays of sexism and misogyny, however it was operationally structured in a way that reproduced gendered hierarchies and naturalized men's comfort and dominance in games/tech spaces. The membership model reflects a gendered understanding of technical competence with Wizard/men being 'knowledgeable experts' and Witch/women as 'tech novices', which is reinforced through volunteer mentor structure, which works to naturalize the stereotype that men are naturally "more knowledgeable" than women in STEM fields. As a tech space, LGC is structured to be comfortable for men – i.e. men are the rightful subjects and occupy positions of power. In other words, LGC is effectively providing the same comfortable experience for men that they would experience in other game spaces. The composition of the community (women outnumbering men) and presence of the explicit feminist content (which is friendly, not angry) is visibly different, but not presenting a challenge or uncomfortable experience for men. Popular feminism accommodates men through its heteronormativity, which is defined by gendered norms. The design of LGC reinforces gendered hierarchies, men's inclusion (and their 'right to access') games/tech spaces, and to occupy a comfortable position within these spaces ('rightful place'). These are the conditions under which enables a white middle-aged male figurehead[37]

[37] The rise of the LGC Dad is also enabled by the 'founder worship' culture of tech industry, where white men people like Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg are revered as brilliant and visionary leaders and bolsters the stereotype that the natural leaders of the tech world are (and can only be) white, heterosexual, cisgender men.

such as the LGC Dad to rise to power in a feminist organization.

## Racial Hierarchies

### *LGC as a "Bastion of White Feminism"*

LGC's reliance on an unpaid volunteer model to organize and run its programs resulted in a lot of the programming being organized by members who had the time, expertise, and resources (e.g. financial stability) to take on these unpaid activities such as leading workshops or providing mentorship. The volunteers, organizers, and the participants of LGCs programs had a certain level of white and middle-class social privilege, which is also representative of the majority of people working in the games industry (Kumar et. al., 2022; Weststar & Legault, 2018).

LGC's volunteer model works to maintain status quo, reproducing and reinforcing the same social hierarchies (gender, racial and class) hierarchies that organize the games industry. An intersectional analysis of the volunteer-model shows how it inadvertently excludes diverse voices, perspectives, and people from fully participating in LGC. For example, as discussed above, the volunteer model reinforces gender hierarchies because women generally do not have as much leisure time as men to devote to learning tech skills or teaching others (Winn & Heeter, 2009), leading to an overrepresentation of men in mentorship and instructor positions. As I will discuss below, the volunteer model also worked to reinforce racial hierarchies.

The ways in which feminism is practiced is diverse, informed by one's lived experiences participating in activism, media production, and games culture. As the only women-centered game making space in the city, LGC attracted a wide range of women game makers from diverse backgrounds, however the LGC community was predominantly comprised of white women.

Storytellers jokingly (but also quite seriously) pointed out this whiteness, with one describing LGC as a "bastion of white feminism." When asked about why and how LGC had become a 'bastion of white feminism." this Storyteller replied matter-of-factly "Look at their board [of directors]". The Directors of LGC were, at this time, white, educated, middle-class women.[38] The composition of the Board of Directors serves as a case in point about whose perspectives and experiences inform the design of the organization. The homogeneity of LGC's leadership did not represent the experiences of marginalized women who experience (sometimes multiple) barriers of exclusion that continue to keep low-income and visible minorities out of the games industry. In other words, without a diversity of perspectives informing the organization's operations, LGC was space for white women, designed by white women.

### *A Wi-Fi Network for White People*

LGC was a racially homogenous space, but this was also an issue that LGC organizers were aware of and trying to fix. In an effort to be more welcoming to people of colour, LGC used inclusive language on their website and included images of women of colour in their (artwork and photographs) in their promotional materials. Storytellers were critical of LGC's approach to creating a diverse community of women game developers, describing it as "lazy," "wishful," and "hollow." For example, Storyteller G commented on how LGC's use of images of women of colour on promotional materials was misleading, and not truly representative of the whiteness of the space. Storyteller G was a woman of colour herself, whose image was used in many of LGC's promotional materials. She also pointed out how LGC prominently featured a

[38] I was a Co-Director and I also fall into this category. As discussed in Chapter 4, I am mixed race but white passing, I hold a graduate degree, and I come from a middle class background.

black woman on their website home page, stating “I think she came to one thing and never came back.”

Storyteller E, a game maker who identified as an Asian woman, commented that she was often approached by LGC’s organizers to provide consultation services on how to make their space more racially diverse. She used these consultation sessions as an opportunity to talk to LGC leadership about her discomfort in the space as it related to Asian racism and cultural appropriation. For example, Storyteller E engaged in discussions with them about Takoyaki’s name and cultural appropriation (the co-founders/owners of Takoyaki were both white and had no connection to Japan), and also the password to the Wi-Fi network, which was “misohorny.” The password was racist and incredibly insensitive to the Asian community, and an example of how Takoyaki-LGC created a space where white people felt safe enough to integrate a racist joke into their core infrastructure. Entering the Wi-Fi password was a daily reminder of white supremacy, and the sexualization of the password matters even more when a woman has to give it to someone. Storyteller E talked about feeling embarrassed when having to give the Wi-Fi password to people who she invited into the space to work with her. Uttering “misohorny” forces the person to engage in misogynistic racism and serves to remind Asian women of their position in the gender and racial hierarchies that organize tech spaces.

In response to Storyteller E’s feedback, Takoyaki changed the Wi-Fi password and also the name of the business, apologizing to members of the LGC-Takoyaki community who had been hurt by it. Instead of just acknowledging their racist mistake, Takoyaki used this as an

example of their supposed "commitment" to anti-racism.[39] But simply making this statement did not mean they were committed to anti-racism, but rather the racism would be less visible.

LGC was full of white people, and as such, it was white women who were filling roles as volunteers and committee members. Storyteller H talked about how she served on a selection committee (comprised entirely of white women) who were tasked with selecting applicants for a LGC program. She spoke about an instance where another committee member remarked that "we need to include [name of racialized person] in the program because they're brown." When confronted by Storyteller H, the committee member who made the racist remark reacted in a mocking way "Oh, don't pretend to be offended!" and the committee moved on. This is another example of how LGC maintained white supremacy – a space where white people feel safe enough to make racist remarks without fear of consequence – but now behind closed doors. The value that a woman of colour brings to LGC is not contributing their lived experience to build a space that can be more inclusive to people of colour, but rather the appearance of LGC as an already diverse space. Although this happened behind closed doors, racial tensions and racial hierarchies are felt, even in the absence of overt racism.

### *"Lazy Diversity"*

Although it tried to be more welcoming to people of colour, LGC automatically defaulted to being a "white space" - a space where the comfort of white people is prioritized and maintained over the needs of people of colour. Storyteller E talked about how she felt she was repeating the same advice "over and over again" during consultation meetings with LGC. She had suggested on more than one occasion that LGC should try to make connections with

[39] Takoyaki's willingness to correct these overt examples of racism may have more to do with its potential to impact Takoyaki's bottom line, as it had staked its claim in being a safe working space for marginalized game developers (which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 6).

organizations that serve groups that have historically been excluded by games culture, as well as other advocacy or social justice organizations: “It's not that hard. You get diversity by starting with diversity and you get a lack of diversity by starting with a lack of diversity…You can't be lazy, and if there's a diversity problem within your community, then you have to look outside of it.” Storyteller E recounted how she was met with resistance and exhaustion from organizers whenever she brought up racial social justice issues to their attention: “I get a sense of exasperation from [organizers], like ‘haven’t we done enough?’” This is echoed by Storyteller Y, who also noted that LGC was reluctant to implement the suggestions made by people of colour: “[LGC] is happy to have you in their space, so long as you don’t try to change anything”.

Storytellers who identified as women of colour found it challenging exist in this community and talked about the amount of mental and emotional energy they expended to navigate this space. Storyteller Y talked about how another woman of colour had actually prepared her prior to them attending a social: “She said to me, ‘Ok, it’s going to be a whole bunch of white people’ (laughs). If it weren’t for [name] then I wouldn’t have gone in, but I trusted her, so I did.” Although LGC may have been a “bastion of white feminism,” it was the only women-in-games community in Toronto, and non-white women preferred to participate in this community over the other local games communities, which were designed by and meant for white men. But women of colour did not come to LGC because the space was designed with them in mind; they came to LGC it because they had nowhere else to go.

### *Reflecting on and Confronting White and Heteronormative Privilege*

While in the LGC space, racialized women (and also queer and non-binary individuals) talked about their experiences of exclusion and marginalization in games culture and industry

with other members. It was through these conversations that intersectional feminist discourse was introduced to and circulated within the community. Intersectional feminist theory acknowledges the existence of structural differences in power and privilege encourages women to see race and class, as well as gender, as crucial factors shaping female destiny (hooks, 1989). It is a critical feminist theory that overtly names patriarchy and capitalism, and calls attention to racism, homophobia, and ableism. With these broader insights, intersectional feminism allows for a solidarity between all patriarchy-affected groups that is based on an awareness of differences as well as the all-too-common gendered experiences that women share (intersectional feminism is essential for anti-oppressive movement-building (hooks, 1989).

Storytellers who were not familiar with intersectional feminism prior to joining LGC learned about it primarily through their conversations with other members. Feminist dialogue between members made a significant impact on how some of the Storytellers understood feminism and their own feminist practice. White, heterosexual, and middle-class Storytellers in particular expressed appreciation for the opportunity to discuss and explore feminism beyond the narrow understandings of feminism that were introduced to them as girls and teenagers (e.g., "girl power", but also feminism being synonymous with misandry), as told by Storyteller L:

> "As a teenager, I would proudly say that I wasn't a feminist, and then someone at LGC said that if you believe in equal rights for women in any sense then yes you are a feminist. And was like, oh yeah, so, ok, I'm not necessarily a misandrist or a bra-burner but I'm in every fiber of being, actually a feminist! And I never was comfortable saying that I was a feminist until LGC…In some of the circles I run in, like in film, it's pejorative to call yourself a feminist. And I've since gotten

over that, because it's not in any way. Admitting that I am very much one, and the people that I love happen to be as well, and that's one of the reasons why I like them, it's been very interesting for me."

Storytellers appreciated how LGC created a space where they could form friendships with women from different backgrounds (white women, middle-class women, queer women, transwomen, women of colour, etc.) and learn from each other. White and middle-class Storytellers in particular expressed gratitude for the opportunities to learn about heteronormativity, transphobia, and their own race and class privilege from their friends. For example, Storyteller K talked about how she became more reflexive about how her actions and her art may be hurtful to others:

"… it makes me think about what I say, and I do sometimes worry. Like I participated in something with [other member] the other day, and it occurred to me that it's slightly transphobic because it was me and [boyfriend] both wearing a dress and red-cheeky makeup. And it was very Monty Python-esque and very funny, and I thought 'this is slightly transphobic' and we laughed at that, and then you think "Monty Python is transphobic" and then you go 'oh no, I find that funny'."

She went on to talk about how this new understanding of intersectional feminism empowered her to 'call out' oppressive behaviour and have uncomfortable conversations

in her personal life outside of the LGC space:

> **“**You realize how shitty you can be. Like meeting trans people [at LGC] has been very impactful for me. Like I met [LGC member], and now I see her posting all these things about trans issues and she's also very funny about it, and makes it kind of accessible. And then you just get involved in trans issues, talking about it, and you want to be like ‘aww that's shitty’ when someone says something transphobic. And then I try to talk to my boyfriend about it and he doesn't get it, and then we sit down and talk about it and by the end he's frustrated, like ‘it's not a thing! it's stupid!’ And then two weeks later he'll suddenly say something about transphobic stuff and I’m like, ‘oh! you do get it!’"

Storyteller K illustrates how it can be difficult to be an ally (e.g., to talk about trans issues with non-trans persons), even though she felt strongly about supporting and standing up for marginalized people. These were difficult conversations to have, with others and with themselves. Several of the Storytellers noted how self-examination of their own power and privilege could be a very uncomfortable experience. For Storyteller F, learning about intersectional feminism and engaging in self-reflection as a white and middle-class woman could sometimes become too overwhelming for her:

> “I don't really know how to talk about race issues properly, I don't know how to talk about gender issues properly. I don't know if there is a proper way to talk about it. If there is I'm sure I'm not doing it. And I just end up going down this

> rabbit hole, like ‘oh shit everything I've ever thought or done or said is extremely unkind to women, very racist, very everything’ even though I don't particularly feel that I'm any of those things… I'm very scared. Like, I feel like if I learn anymore shit, I'll never want to do anything ever again. I get overwhelmed and then I shut down.”

Storyteller F was very concerned about wanting to “do things properly” but was unsure of what that was. For her, not knowing the “proper” language to talk about race and gender issues made engaging with those issues intimidating. Similarly, Storyteller L, spoke about struggling to use “proper” or politically correct language:

> “As bad or as dickish as this sounds, I don't want to hamper my personal creativity by constantly checking off all the boxes to make sure I'm being absolutely politically correct, which is not really fair and not really nice, but I'm also not really fair and not really nice… I feel like I put being funny above most things, and being funny is sometimes like, being extremely offensive. Uh, so, yeah, I guess my concern is that I don't like the idea of hurting someone but I don't like the idea of censoring myself either. I just have to find a way to balance doing what I want to do and in a way that I think is important without harming anyone else's progress. God, I sound like such a dick!”

Storyteller L did not want to hurt marginalized people, but she also did not like the idea of compromising her personal creativity. By referring to herself as a “dick” and “not really fair and

not really nice," she is acknowledging that she does not want to necessarily give up the power and privileges that come with being white and middle class. Similarly, Storyteller A weighed the importance of engaging in anti-oppressive feminist practice against the limits it might place on their creativity:

> "These discussions are helpful, but sometimes I feel like, 'oh dear, everything, or half the things I am doing are bad,' and I suppose it's a bit censoring, or hindering, but like Storyteller M said, I don't want my artistic [creation] to be hindered because of this. It's difficult."

These quotes from Storytellers illustrate that it was difficult to be an ally. While they felt that it was important to acknowledge their socioeconomic and racial privileges, they also struggled with feelings of guilt and shame about how their actions (or inaction) could potentially be hurting others.

### *Creating Space for Critical Feminisms: "LGC Talks" Workshops*

Many of the Storytellers talked about two specific workshop events as another example of how the organization created a space to openly talk about intersectional feminism: The Feminist Game Salon and the Race/Gender in Games Workshop. These two workshops were part of a short-lived series branded "LGC Talks." The Feminist Game Salon was organized by a researcher from a local university and was meant to create space to talk about feminism and facilitate dialogue between attendees on the topic more broadly. The Race/Gender in Games Workshop also sought facilitate dialogue

between attendees and specifically on racial oppression in the tech industry. The organizers of this workshop – two women of colour - were not afraid to be "killjoys," to use Sara Ahmed's (2010) term. One of the Storyteller described the workshop as "necessary [work], but I'm being honest, it was also a bummer to learn that the thing you want to do might be considered cultural appropriation."

Storytellers appreciated how the LGC Talks workshops facilitated these opportunities for meaningful discourse about feminism and games, noting that the organization was ideally positioned to help lead and facilitate these conversations because it was a community space (as opposed to a university space, which was, in contrast, seen as exclusive and somewhat intimidating to those outside of academia). When asked what advocacy-focused programming at LGC might look like, Storyteller Y suggested activities such as reading and talking about feminist theory and unpacking what feminism means within the context of the games industry: "Like, what does it mean to be a feminist game maker? Does it mean that we're women and we make games? Or does it mean that there is feminist content in our games? And there doesn't have to be consensus, but it'd be nice if it were discussed."

These two workshops were very well attended (a full house for each one) and generated excitement about the potential for more advocacy-focused programming, which is captured in the reflection blog post about the LGC Talks that was posted to their website:

> "… this was just the beginning of a larger discussion that people seem to be eager to engage with. What's needed is for us to share the labour of planning and hosting these events, which would hopefully entail even more focused and nuanced discussions and workshops…Game designers and critics from other

> cities have expressed interest and could be included via Skype or other means. The participation in the first two LGC Talks indicates quite clearly the desire for an open dialogue in tandem with other LGC activities- all we need to do is organize!" (LGC, 2014, n.p.)

The LGC Talks are examples of how the organization was fulfilling its mandate to "create time and space to…support the socio-cultural changes that are necessary to make game design accessible to all" (LGC, 2014, n.p.). Storytellers from racialized backgrounds talked about how the Race/Gender in Games Workshop in particular was as an example of LGC programming where underrepresented and marginalized people felt welcome, heard, and supported, and they expressed deep disappointment that the LGC Talks did not become a part of the regularly offered programming. If the LGC Talks were so well received, and if they were working towards the goals of creating a diverse and inclusive space, then why did they stop? The simple answer is because the labour involved in organizing advocacy-focused programming was not sustainable under the conditions that LGC created.

***"I will do one workshop for free. The rest need to be paid."***

Workshops at LGC were entirely led and organized by members. The member who proposed the workshop was responsible for developing the content and leading the event while LGC provided administrative support (e.g., promotion, ticketing) and the infrastructure (e.g. space and technology). According to a Storyteller who was also a LGC organizer, this was how all workshops were run: "if you want to do something, then you are free to go ahead and

organize it." Members were free to organize events, but they were also organizing the event *for free.*

As noted in the previous section when discussing the membership structure and mentorship model, LGC was a volunteer run organization, and as such, workshop organizers were volunteers who were compensated for their labour with a free LGC membership. The volunteer-model of 'labour in exchange for a membership' are acceptable terms for white and middle-class members, however for racialized women it felt like an unfair exchange. They were being offered membership to a space that was not built with them in mind: a space with undertones of white supremacy, where they were already performing affective labour and experiencing pressure to be a model minority, and where their presence was actually in service to LGC (having their images used to make LGC appear like a diverse space).

This is a catch-22 situation. LGC wants to be more welcoming to racial minorities, and creating a welcoming and diverse space involves (at minimum) engagement in anti-racist education and dialogue (like the LGC Talks). Because LGC does not pay its volunteers, the workshop organizer is being offered free membership to an organization where they are a minority and a space that can be uncomfortable for them to be in.

The Race/Gender in Games Workshop was proposed as potential series, but LGC is designed in such a way that it is expected that the facilitators provide their services for free, which one Storyteller declined to do: "If you want me to continue to talk about racism to white people then you have to pay. I will do one workshop for free, but the rest need to be paid." LGC was not prepared to commit any financial support to organizing the series, and instead upheld the volunteer model as the way workshops at LGC were run.

Storytellers from racialized backgrounds noted how they often found themselves providing free anti-racist education, consulting, and facilitation services at LGC. These Storytellers were not surprised that they were expected to provide this labour for free, as told by Storyteller Y: "spaces for white people rarely acknowledge the labour put upon people of colour to educate white people about racial oppression." As noted in the previous section, LGC depended on their racialized community members to do anti-racism advocacy work, and this contributed to the burn out of people of colour. The Storytellers talked about how between fielding requests from LGC to provide anti-racist education and consultation services to 'become more diverse' and making their own requests to LGC to be less racist (such as changing the Wi-Fi password), being a part of the LGC community took a toll on their mental health and ultimately contributed to their decision to step away from the organization.

The volunteer model maintains racial hierarchies by acting as a barrier of a diverse space and sustainable advocacy-focused programming. The anti-racism work at LGC is put on racialized women to initiate and facilitate, and this is unsustainable. Relying on volunteers to provide free anti-racist education and consultation services (i.e., people of colour teaching white people about racism for free) can contribute to burn out of these members, which leads to LGC being an even less racially diverse space than it already is.

**Class Hierarchies**

While the Storytellers did not talk about class as much as race and gender, it is important to acknowledge that there was class privilege at LGC. As mentioned previously in Chapter 3 and earlier in this chapter, the majority of the Storytellers and most of the members of LGC were white and from middle class backgrounds. The handful of low-income Storytellers who shared

their stories with me talked about how LGC was unintentionally exclusive and designed in a way that did not allow them to fully participate. For example, despite implementing a "pay-what-you-can" policy for LGC workshops and events, Storyteller B noted that she still did not attend some these activities because it was "really embarrassing to say that you don't have five dollars for a workshop." Low-income Storytellers talked about not having enough free time to volunteer (provide free labour) with LGC on a regular basis and this prevented them from becoming mentors, selection committee members, workshop organizers, and other roles where their perspectives may have been valuable (such as explaining why a 'pay-what-you-can' policy may not be as helpful in removing barriers for low-income participants as they perceived it to be). Storyteller C specifically commented on how LGC's unpaid volunteer labour model worked to maintain class hierarchies:

> "the status quo of marginalized people doing labour for free…It's atrocious and terrible and the same issues that you see with classism in general, which is one of the reasons why I think intersectionality is so god damn important."

Storyteller C, who identified as non-binary, also critiqued LGC's membership model for upholding the gender binary too:

> "If I were to go and try to be a member of LGC today, I couldn't. I don't have the money for membership fees and I definitely don't feel comfortable having to label myself as either a man or a woman."

Storyteller C's critique is another example of how intersectional oppression was built into the design of LGC (this time at the intersection of gender and class). Low-income game makers like Storyteller C had two options to obtain free membership: label themselves as a woman to obtain the free "Witch" membership or label themselves a man and volunteer for LGC in exchange for the free "Wizard" membership. Neither of these free membership options were suitable for Storyteller C. They did not identify with either gender nor were they were not comfortable labelling themselves as a woman to get the free Witch membership. Although the Wizard category was technically gender neutral, Storyteller C did not have the time to volunteer in exchange for a free membership, and they were unable to afford the paid Wizard membership option. Storyteller C's experience demonstrates how the membership excludes low-income game makers and others who do not fit neatly into these two categories.

Low-income Storytellers talked about feeling left out and somewhat invisible within the LGC community. They appreciated the existence of a woman-centered games space, but wished the organization would seek out and include the perspectives of low-income game makers to make it more welcoming for them. At the time of Storyteller B's interview, the leadership of LGC was comprised entirely of white and middle-class women, whose lived experiences differed from those of low-income game makers. She expressed that LGC's leadership was indifferent towards the needs of low-income game makers in the community: "I know most white, typical feminists do not care about poor people. They don't." Like the racialized Storytellers, the low-income Storytellers were exhausted at the idea of having to continually self-advocate for themselves and have their voices be heard, especially when it did not result in change. This is another example of

LGC's "lazy," "wishful," and "hollow" approach to creating a community of diverse game makers that the Storytellers described when discussing racial diversity at LGC.

In addition to feeling left out of LGC, low-income game makers can experience further layers of exclusion when their voices are not included in research about game spaces and communities. It can be difficult to include the perspectives and experiences of low-income game makers if they are not participating in these communities for the reasons stated above. In the context of this study, the handful of low-income Storytellers who shared their stories with me did so because 1) they felt it was important that their experiences be documented, even if they did not really have the spare time to participate, and 2) I had built a relationship with them over the years, and they trusted me[40] to tell their story. After interviewing the low-income Storytellers, I came to understand how much labour was involved in the act of storytelling, and how I was undercompensating them for their time and contributions to this study. Speaking to the racialized and low-income Storytellers prompted me to examine my own research practices and as a result I increased the honorarium from $25 to $200. I paid for this honorarium out of pocket. The ability to raise the honorarium to $200 adds yet another dimension of class privilege related to storytelling – not only whose voices are included, but also the researcher's ability to find diverse perspectives and adequately compensate for Storytellers' time and labour. I include this story not to suggest that graduate students should pay interview participants honorariums that may be out of their budget, but rather to highlight how seeking out and including diverse voices can lead to a change in established research practice. If I had not spoken to racialized and low-income Storytellers, the design of this

[40] As a white-passing and middle-class woman myself, there was good reason for low-income game makers to view me the same way they viewed the LGC leadership.

research study would have likely replicated established norms and unintentionally privileged the perspectives and experiences of white and middle-class women.

**Elevating White Middle-Class Women**

> *"The platform that elevates some women is a requirement for white feminist power to operate and maintain dominance" (Singh & Banet-Weiser, 2022, p. 173).*

LGC was structured in a way that inadvertently privileged the advancement and elevation of certain women over others; namely, white and middle-class women. White and middle-class women are already poised to succeed in the tech industry. This group is also the default subject of popular feminism, and the ones who can "all too easily rise up" to participate in LGC's platform feminism (Singh & Sharma, 2019). For example, the Feminist Salon was organized and delivered by a white ciswoman who was a researcher at a local university. Volunteering to organize the workshop was aligned with her career goals and not a strain on her resources or her mental health. In other words, organizing a free workshop was a net positive for her.

In contrast, "rising up" on the LGC platform was more difficult for the women of colour who organized the Race/Gender workshop. In this context, unpaid volunteering is read as an act of feminist resistance, and this resistance is accessed more easily by white and middle-class women. Racialized women's refusal to do unpaid labour and prioritizing their mental health and well-being (taking care to not to burn out in a bastion of white feminism) does not register as a legible form of feminist resistance. At LGC, anti-racist feminisms that are based in care, survival, and refusal are not as visible. The visibility of women of colour providing free labour

(and burdening them with the task of educating white people in a space that centers white women) works to maintain ongoing racial inequities.

Relying exclusively on the homogeneous volunteer labour pool of middle-class white men and women to organize and run programming is an example of the "lazy diversity" critique expressed by Storyteller Y at the start of this section ("It's not that hard. You get diversity by starting with diversity and you get a lack of diversity by starting with a lack of diversity…You can't be lazy, and if there's a diversity problem within your community, then you have to look outside of it."). Her advice to reach out to other groups and organizations to build coalitions and possibly engage in load sharing or exchange of labour/services was not taken up. She expressed hope that LGC would in the future "move into the direction where there is a dialogue, where we can understand and dig through differences, and work through those differences" instead of remaining a "bastion of white feminism."

### *Unlearning White Privilege as an Act of Feminist Resistance*

LGC is structured in a way that the onus and responsibility is placed on racialized women to perform self-advocacy labour that, ultimately, ends up benefitting white women in the postfeminist paradigm. This unfair and unequal burden results in the burn out of the marginalized individual (and in some cases, their departure from the organization), maintaining the racial homogeneity of LGC. Perhaps a bit ironically, the most prevalent and visible form of anti-racist feminist practice at LGC was white women talking about unlearning their privilege while the women of colour who were responsible for this education burned out around them. White women Storytellers talking about reflecting on their white heteronormative privilege as act

of feminist resistance serves as an example of how the much the framework of individual self-improvement has come to dominate popular narratives of feminism.

It is also an example of how critical feminist discourse can be twisted by neoliberal logics. Acts of feminist resistance must be couched within a neoliberal and postfeminist framework to be understood and register as resistance in the first place. White Storytellers talk about anti-racist feminism through a neoliberal lens of individualism, where they are always and by default the site for feminist political action. In this way, the underlying neoliberal ideology of LGC and its emphasis on individualism is structured to contain feminist action to the individual. This matters because if the LGC platform is configured to always locate feminist politics to the site of the individual, then it precludes feminist politics that are based on collective action or thinking about oppression as systemic or 'built in' (Benjamin, 2019), and challenging structural oppression requires collective, not individual, action (hooks, 2000). While critical feminist discourses may circulate throughout LGC, they are reframed by the neoliberal logics that organize LGC and thus rendered ineffective for creating collective action and structural change.

## Chapter 6: Analysis: Feminist Game Making at LGC

In this chapter, I examine the aspect of the organization that is focused on teaching women how to make games. I draw on Storytellers' experiences participating in LGC's programs to analyze how LGC made women's game making visible and supported ("empowered") women who wanted to make games, but was also structured to 'discipline' women into becoming the ideal neoliberal subject that the games and tech industry privileges (and, arguably demands of its workforce).

### Getting More Women into Games

As discussed in Chapter 2, girls and women are chronically underrepresented in tech fields (AAUW, 2004; Cabot & Walravens, 2017; Corneliussen, 2012, 2024; Mauk et. al., 2020; Sturman, 2009;) and have less opportunities to engage in (and are less encouraged to pursue) game making than boys and men (Frieze & Blum, 2002; Fisher, Jenson, & de Castell, 2011). Like the "teaching girls to code" initiatives that were cropping up at this time (see Mauk et. al., 2020), LGC was focused on women's inclusion in tech by empowering women through skills development and confidence building. LGC offered a variety of learning programs that taught women the skills to make their own games, primarily delivered through workshops, multi-week incubators, and game jams. Workshops and incubator programs were classroom-like sessions that taught participants the fundamentals skills of game making (e.g. game design, art assets, writing and narrative, music production, software tools and programming languages). Game jams were social gatherings that provided opportunities for informal learning between those who were participating in the jam, as described by Storyteller G: "It's about collaborating and learning from each other. Nobody is an expert in everything." Games that were created through

incubators and game jams were usually showcased at special events and at the regularly scheduled Monthly Speaker Socials.

LGC was contributing to changing the games industry by increasing the number of women who were making games and promoting women game makers who were a part of the community. One of the ways that they showed their impact in creating change was through developing a 'LGC codex' to collect and keep track of all the games that had been created by LGC members. Each entry in the LGC codex included a thumbnail image of the game, the name of the creator, and a link to where the game could be played or purchased. Members could add their own entries, and LGC also automatically added the games that were created through their programs to the codex. The codex was an impressive collection of games, attesting to the success of LGC's programs (to get women making games). It also served to pushed back against the popular industry narrative idea that there was a lack of women game makers or that women were not interested in making games. The codex was visible and playable proof that women game makers existed and that the number of women who were making games was increasing.

**Professional Game Making Goals**

Another way that LGC was changing games culture was by supporting the members who wanted to make games professionally and work in the games industry. Although developing a "commercial" game or getting a job in the games industry was not a prescribed goal of LGC's programs, LGC did offer a clear path for members to pursue professional game making through its collaboration with Takoyaki, the co-working site for web and game developers that also served as LGC's official headquarters and housed LGC for free. On the LGC website, Takoyaki's programs and services were advertised as part of LGC's programming, as if these

services were being offered by LGC: “We also support our members interested in exhibiting or commercializing their games by providing **free** workspace, mentorship, marketing and business support, hiring and recruitment help, and publishing and production services.” (LGC, 2015, emphasis in original). LGC’s programs focused on teaching game making skills to novice game makers, while Takoyaki programs and services focused on business development (e.g. how to run a small studio), professional development (e.g. skills training), and other services that taught game makers how to be entrepreneurs (e.g. how to set up a virtual storefront, how to get your game on the App store etc.).

Storytellers talked about how access to Takoyaki’s services and space helped them on their career path in games/tech. Most LGC members came to the organization with no prior game making experience or connections and thus relied heavily on LGC’s programs to make connections and create professional networks, as well as learn technical skills. Takoyaki’s professional services and business development expertise helped them navigate the industry they were trying to break into.

**LGC x Takoyaki**

LGC’s collaboration Takoyaki began in January 2012, which was two months after the LGC meetup group was formed. As noted in LGC’s 2012 Year in Review report, Takoyaki provided LGC with access to resources, space, and professional expertise:

> January also marked the beginning of LGC’s close relationship with Takoyaki, a then-new collaborative workspace for web and game developers. The light-filled, well-equipped space was ideal for working sessions and events, but even better was the realization that LGC and Takoyaki’s founders shared many values, goals,

> and ambitions. Takoyaki continues to be a home base for LGC, and its founder, [NAME], later became a director and a driving force behind our later successes. (LGC, 2012).

As of March 2012, all LGC events, programs, and activities were being exclusively held in the Takoyaki space. Takoyaki's "light-filled, [and] well-equipped space" was in a former factory building downtown and spread over two floors. On the first floor were several rows of tables and chairs that served as workspace for Takoyaki's members (clients). There were also several small, private meeting rooms, a library of video games and books, and a communal kitchen. The second floor was an open gallery/exhibition space that was equipped with state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment and could be configured to host various types of large gatherings and events (e.g., computers, speakers, microphones, lights, power bars, cables and adapters, etc.). As a grassroots group with no operating budget, having access to this kind of infrastructure removed the practical barriers that came with hosting events (e.g., storing equipment, reliable access to power and Wi-Fi, accessibility). Access to event and working space in Toronto was, and still is, prohibitively expensive and scarce. Having a home base and access to these resources for free allowed LGC to rapidly expand [41] beyond meetups and to offer many different types of programing such as monthly 'speaker socials' where members could present their works-in-progress or ideas, skills development workshops, game jams and incubator style development workshops targeting first time game makers, a mentorship program, and a marketplace where members could sell their games and other merchandise (e.g., stickers, pins, shirts).

[41] See Appendix B: Timeline of LGC Events 2011-12.

LGC and Takoyaki were deeply enmeshed with each other. In addition to occupying the same space (with LGC being housed within Takoyaki), events and programs were often run as a collaboration between the organizations and there was also significant overlap between the organizations' leaders,[42] staff, and members. Separating the organizations was nearly impossible and many just treated them as the same entity. LGC was deeply entangled with Takoyaki and the relationship between the organizations was mutually beneficial and sustaining – the success of LGC was tied to the success of Takoyaki, and vice-versa. Below I discuss the organizations' shared neoliberal values of individual empowerment and women's inclusion in games/tech industries and how this influenced the kinds of feminist practices that were supported and made visible in the space. To signal the deep entanglement between the two organizations, and as a way to honour the Storytellers' perspective that LGC and Takoyaki were essentially the same organization, I will be referring to the organizations as 'LGC-Takoyaki' wherever appropriate.

**Women Game Makers as an Untapped Market**

It's important to understand the context and atmosphere of the LGC-Takoyaki space that the Storytellers participated in. Takoyaki was a business and a co-working space for web and game developers. At this time, there was a proliferation of co-working spaces that were specifically designed to meet the growing demand of the tech workforce's freelancers, independent contractors, and entrepreneurs. These tech-focused co-working spaces sell more than just desk space – they provide workers with a community of collaborators (Mitev, De Vaujany, Laniary, Bohas, & Fabbri, 2019). Tech co-working spaces are regarded as "serendipity

[42] Two out the three LGC founding co-directors were full-time employees of Takoyaki Studio. One of Takoyaki Studio's two co-founders was also a founding LGC co-director and would later become the LGC Executive Director.

accelerators," designed to "host creative people and entrepreneurs who endeavour to break isolation and find a convivial environment that favours meetings and collaboration" (Moriset, 2014, p.24). They promote entrepreneurship by stimulating collaboration in a space that "feeds innovation and creativity" and providing access to resources, services, and assistance in the support of innovation (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021, p.1). Like other tech industry co-working spaces, Takoyaki was a community that was centered around capitalist values like entrepreneurship, individual drive, and economic success; and these values were reflected in the space.

While Takoyaki presented itself as a charitable benefactor to LGC, it was, first and foremost, a business, and therefore it had a vested business interest in providing LGC with free resources and infrastructure. In addition to being marketed as a niche co-working space for independent game developers, Takoyaki was also marketing itself as an inclusive workspace. Members of tech co-working spaces are mostly young professionals, predominantly men, who act as small businesses with the dominance of IT, creative and knowledge-intensive areas (Holienka & Racek, 2015). Women, having previously been excluded from web and game development, were now being encouraged to enter the tech industry, and they also required workspace where they felt comfortable.[43] Women game makers were an untapped market for co-working spaces. By housing LGC under its roof for free, Takoyaki appeared as if it was committed to building a diverse and inclusive games industry – one that was welcoming to women.

LGC served as a recruiting ground for Takoyaki's potential clients, and both organizations benefitted from this arrangement. Similar to the LGC codex of games, the number

[43] As noted in the previous section about 'women-only' spaces, tech spaces are male-dominated and deeply sexist and can make for uncomfortable working conditions for women in tech.

of women who progressed from learning to make games at LGC to using Takoyaki's professional services and pursuing a career as a professional game maker served as evidence of LGC's success in getting more women into the games industry, while the presence of LGC members working in the Takoyaki space served to designate the co-working space as a 'safe' professional space for women game makers.

Takoyaki would offer some LGC members free workspace, and it was visibly full of LGC members, including me.[44] I used the space to work on my fieldnotes, booked meeting rooms for private conversations or calls, used the kitchen, and socialized with friends who were also working there. Initially, I felt welcome working in the Takoyaki space, and I understand why other LGC members would want to work out of here and be a part of the co-working community. But as time went on, and I became more critical about LGC's deep entanglement with Takoyaki, I felt less comfortable working there. My own experience demonstrates the tensions between inclusion and exclusion, in that I felt included in the LGC community, but at the same time I felt somewhat excluded from the shared space that was controlled by Takoyaki. This tension was something that Storyteller H also talked about in her interview:

> "I was really excited about LGC being at Takoyaki, like 'this is excellent! we have this space! Takoyaki is being so nice letting us use their space, they're going to organize some things, how wonderful.' And at one point the Takoyaki people were like 'hey you can come work here during the week if you want, cause you're like part of this community, and you don't have to pay.' So I told my brother and he was very aptly like 'so are they paying you? cause you're basically working for

[44] As the LGC embedded researcher, I was also offered free workspace at Takoyaki Studio.

them, like, hey I'm this person, I make stuff, I'm part of this community, I work at Takoyaki, I'll tweet about it, come check it out, ya know?' and I was like no, no, no, it's not like that at all. And then very quickly it became like that. I'm like, just very naive. It took a very long time for me to be like, oh, they're a business, and they have this interest in representing themselves in this way."

Storyteller H's experience demonstrates how Takoyaki's offer of free workspace to women game makers was less about providing a welcoming space for women game developers and creating a diverse industry, and more of a strategic business move that exploited women for free promotion and marketing labour that would recruit more women into their space, and, ultimately, convert them into paying clients.

**The Path to Professionalization**

Women came to LGC for a myriad of personal and professional reasons. Some women were just there to make, play, and talk about games for fun in a women-centered community while others wanted to pursue a career in game development. The reasons why women first came to LGC and their level of participation in LGC differs for each Storyteller, but there is also a discernable pattern of LGC-Takoyaki trying to steer these women towards professionalization, even when that was not their reason for being a part of LGC. To capture the complexities of the Storytellers experiences with LGC-Takoyaki over the 3-year period of this study, I draw on my fieldnotes and interviews to construct Storyteller profiles [45] to illustrate this pattern.

[45] To protect the identities of Storytellers, some of the details in their stories have been altered (e.g. role/expertise)

Storytellers M and K are two women who initially came to LGC with no intention of getting a job in the industry, but soon became interested in making games professionally and sought help from LGC-Takoyaki in pursuing their career goal:

Storyteller M:

> *M had previously worked at a video game studio as a QA tester but left her job because of the bad experiences she had working there, which she describes as a boys club. She still wanted to be a part of games somehow, because she thinks they are cool she loves playing them and talking about them. So, she signed up to participate in a LGC game jam, which she described as life changing.*
>
> *In her interview, she says "I was like, 'I'm going to learn how to make them and be a part of games this way and stake my claim', and I realized what I wanted to do was be creative, and I didn't know how, and I didn't feel right about trying to create without permission. And after the [LGC jam], I was like 'I need to make another game, because I need a reason to be here!' and realized that I really liked writing for the game, and so that's what I do now. I'm working at a games company again, and I'm doing game writing there now too, and that's a dream come true for me. LGC gave me the confidence to go back into the games environment creatively."*
>
> *M is still heavily involved in LGC. She is one of the only professional game writers at LGC and she is hired to write for a lot of the games that are produced by LGC members. She also regularly mentors for LGC programs and game jams.*

Storyteller K:

> *K is an artist who made her first game as part of an incubator program. It was an educational role-playing game with a 'strong female character' similar to Carmen Sandiego. She was heavily involved in the LGC community and described herself as a "super volunteer" who attends "all the stuff" and tries to talk to the new people who show up to events and make them feel welcome.*
>
> *When she first joined LGC she was unemployed, and she received encouragement from LGC-Takoyaki to further develop her first game and pursue a career in game development. K was offered working space at Takoyaki, invited to participate in their technical skills workshops, provided with opportunities to showcase her game prototype, and coached on how to promote her game and apply for funding – all for free. She is determined and driven to create a playable prototype of her game and says during her interview: "There are professional*

*development workshops, but it's down to you to produce something - a portfolio, a game, building a network or skills through game jams. It's down to the individual to drive themselves." During this time, LGC-Takoyaki also proposed using K's game as the basis for a grant application that would be submitted by the organization (from her interview: "we need to submit a funding grant, and your game could be it.") The grant application was not successful.*

*Despite her efforts to "get her game off the ground," after a year and a half of developing the game K decides to take a break from full-time professional indie game making. She considers other career paths and ends up getting a job in a games-adjacent tech field. She continues to make games as a hobby (e.g. participates in game jams) and attend LGC socials, but over time she participates in LGC less and less. By 2015 she has stopped attending LGC events and begins to spend more time on other artistic projects.*

In the experiences of both Storytellers M and K, LGC and Takoyaki offers them a path to professionalization that is based on women's self-empowerment through skills acquisition and confidence building. Both M and K talk speak positively about LGC-Takoyaki and how it was up to them to make their dreams of working in games happen. For Storyteller M, it was about finding the confidence to be creative and return to the industry she had left, while Storyteller K relentlessly pursued every opportunity she could to get her game off the ground.

**The "Invisible Undertow"**

But not everyone who came to LGC wanted to make games professionally. Some just wanted to learn how to make games for fun or artistic reasons, such as Storyteller R, who said: "I have zero interest in the market. I'm going to apply for funding, but I make art, and it's just another medium to make art. I don't expect to make money ever in my life and I don't want a job. So, it's more just like skills that I can apply to a different medium." This is echoed by Storyteller Y, who says "I don't see myself being a game maker in the mainstream culture, but I think it's very useful because technology is empowering."

Despite being clear about their intentions for being in this space, the Storytellers who had no intention of joining the games industry noted that they were encouraged by LGC-Takoyaki to turn the games they made for fun into "real games" – games that could be brought to market and sold. For example, Storytellers talked about how they would create a 'little game' as part of a weekend game jam for fun (as a way to hang out with friends), which would be showcased at a later event. Takoyaki would then outline a 'path' that would support the game maker(s) in further developing the game into a playable prototype, including what skills development programs and events they could participate in, and potential funding sources that they could apply for, and what platforms they could sell it on, etc. In summary, games that were created through LGC programs (incubators, game jams, etc.) were, by default, treated as prototypes that could be further developed and brought to the marketplace with the help of Takoyaki. Storytellers talked about being continually being steered towards a path of professionalization and commercialization of their games. Storyteller H, wearily described the constant push towards professionalization as "fighting an invisible undertow":

> *Storyteller H is an artist who was primarily interested in using games as a medium for her "weird art" – she didn't see herself as a game maker in the traditional sense. H creates games for artistic purposes (games as a medium for her art), with no intention to sell or commercialize it. H was approached by LGC-Takoyaki to "work out their space for free, because [she] was part of the community". She was also invited to present a work-in-progress of her latest game at a LGC monthly speaker social. H described presenting in "her style," which was "super casual" and telling jokes as she demonstrated her game. After the presentation, she described being admonished by the Takoyaki co-director for not adhering to professional standards for presentations. This confused H, as she did not feel that this presentation was any different than her previous presentations that she had given at LGC. When she sought clarification from another LGC-Takoyaki member on why her behaviour was inappropriate, she was advised to "do your show, but be conscious of whose stage you're doing it on."*
>
> *A month later, Takoyaki organized a workshop on presentation skills and H is told that this workshop is specifically for her. H reluctantly attended the*

*workshop, but she felt uncomfortable and subsequently withdrew from participating. H's relationship with LGC-Takoyaki deteriorates further after an intellectual property dispute that occurred after Takoyaki created their own version of the innovative dual-screen technology that was originally developed for her art game (i.e., Takoyaki rewrote the code into their own proprietary programming language, effectively creating their own copy of her tech to use for their own purposes). She does not leave LGC or Takoyaki on good terms."*

H's experience exemplifies the tensions in and around professionalization and game making at LGC. Although LGC described itself as a 'learning community' and did not consider itself to be a professional organization or association, many aspects of the organization (the programs, the co-working space environment) revolved around and encouraged professionalization. Games that were made for fun were treated as prototypes to be developed into a "real game." The invisible undertow (to use Storyteller H's term) that pulls women towards the games industry was most intensely felt by Storytellers who had no interest in becoming a part of the industry. Having to constantly fight the undertow – and reject LGC-Takoyaki's continuous offers of professional development - becomes exhausting and causes some Storytellers to leave. Furthermore, when a member is no longer interested in pursuing a career in game development, there is less of a reason to be at LGC. This is illustrated by Storyteller K, who ends up drifting away from LGC after she stops working on her game full-time. Within this space, women are either pushed into professionalization or pushed out of LGC. In this way, the invisible undertow of LGC pulls women into the games industry pipeline. As an entry point into this pipeline, LGC works to discipline women into becoming the ideal neoliberal subjects that the industry privileges and demands.

**Creating Ideal Neoliberal Subjects**

> *"Professionalism is how systems of patriarchy and capitalism enter spaces and discipline subjects." (Harvey & Fisher, 2016)*

LGC is structured to support neoliberal feminism and amplify expressions of neoliberal feminism - where women are construed as entrepreneurial and self-optimizing, encouraged to focus on themselves and their own aspirations, and fully responsible for her own well-being and self-care (Rottenberg, 2018). The tenets of neoliberalism could be felt throughout LGC. There was great emphasis on individual responsibility and improvement through skills development, with the goal of producing games that have market value and participating in a capitalist economy. At LGC, women are individual enterprising subjects, fully responsible for empowering themselves. LGC provided women with the resources and opportunities – they just need to come to the table. Storytellers like M and K are examples the ideal neoliberal feminist subject –women who take it upon themselves to break into games. And they are the women that LGC elevates and amplifies, whether this is promoting their work on social media, giving them a platform to on speaker nights, supporting through a funding application, or recommending them to other LGC members who need a writer.

Storytellers like H, however, who are not interested in joining the industry, find themselves subjected to attempts to discipline them into becoming the ideal neoliberal feminist subject. In Storyteller H's case, it is the creation of a specific workshop to teach her "proper" presentation skills. She refuses to abide by the unstated professional standards that were imposed upon her, or be disciplined:

> "And then I went, and it was just really uncomfortable experience where they had us made these mini talks and presentations and then present them to the class, and I like refused to give mine. Like she came to give me the "choose a number before you go" and I was like "I'm not participating in this dog show" or something. And [Takoyaki organizers] were present for the workshop, and I couldn't help but feel like there was this residual like, [LGC Dad] being like "yes, and now you will learn how to talk" and I was like "I will NOT!""

The feedback to "be conscious of whose stage you're on" given to Storyteller H by another LGC-Takoyaki member begs the question: *whose* stage is it? And what performances are allowed on it? LGC's mission states that they support game making for "critical artist expression," but, as Storyteller H's experience exemplifies, this support only extends to women who stay within the limits of the unstated, but expected, professional standards of corporate capitalism. Women are allowed to "do their show" so long as the role they're performing is that of the ideal neoliberal subject.

LGC offers opportunities for women's empowerment through professionalization – this form of feminist resistance is made legible on the LGC platform. LGC is not designed to support members who are participating in critical, alternative, or anti-capitalist modes of feminist game production (i.e., making games not intended for the market. Storyteller H's feminist game project and H herself falls outside the pipeline. Her game is not a product that will be brought to market, and, furthermore, she refuses to adhere to the expectations of corporate capitalism (i.e., she will not participate in this 'dog show' by performing a trick on command). Storyteller H's actions do not register as feminist resistance on the LGC platform.

Importantly, Storyteller H noted that being steered towards commercialization of her work was something she experienced in other spaces too that were purportedly meant to support artistic and creative practice, and the invisible undertow was not exclusive to LGC: "I guess capitalism just really believes in my work," she joked. The fact that this happens in other artistic and creative community spaces speaks to the hegemonic strength of capitalism and its ability to permeate and organize these spaces.

**Feminist Game Making in Capitalist Contexts**

To be clear, I'm not saying that LGC-Takoyaki never supported critical feminist art projects or game makers. Rather, LGC-Takoyaki supported and amplified feminist game/art projects when the creator willingly participated in the professionalization framework of LGC-Takoyaki's activities. For example, LGC-Takoyaki created "Visiting Artist Residency" positions and invited indie game developers from around the world to spend time at LGC-Takoyaki. The artists who took up these residences were well-known for creating explicitly 'feminist games,'[46] and as part of their residency they would participate in the programming offered by LGC-Takoyaki community (e.g., work out of the LGC-Takoyaki space, teach workshops, present at speaker socials, etc.). LGC gives a platform to and amplifies artists who are creating feminist games for the market and are also participating in the LGC-Takoyaki professionalization programming circuit. In other words, critical feminisms become visible and amplified at LGC when it can be sold. In this context, feminist critique is valued when it can be used to create new or expand existing market (i.e., when creating games that could appeal to, and be purchased by,

[46] I use Schoemann's (2021) definition of feminist games as games that seek to represent diverse experiences and/or are critical commentary of systemic inequities such as racism, transphobia, homophobia, patriarchy.

players who are not a part of the dominant market of white, cishet, male, gamers). LGC's amplification of certain feminist game makers – the ones who have achieved economic success - is another example of popular feminism as a 'happy' feminism.[47] The celebration of woman successfully joining and working in the games industry obscures the exploitation of women that was happening in the shadows at LGC-Takoyaki.

**The Dark Side of LGC: Extractive Relationships and Exploitation**

Capitalism is an economic system that thrives off inequities and exploitation. Under a capitalist framework, women are resources that are exploited by Takoyaki to further its own business interests. Storytellers[48] talked about falls outs between them and Takoyaki that occurred after they hired Takoyaki to provide business development services and then were subsequently being taken advantage of. Storytellers described being pressured into business decisions they did not fully understand but felt that they could not refuse, and then feeling "duped" and "betrayed." The Storytellers' accusations against Takoyaki describe are serious violations of trust, such as theft of intellectual property, mismanagement of funding, and withholding revenue generated from sales of their games. Because of the enmeshment between LGC and Takoyaki – where the organizations were treated as one and the same - these Storytellers felt like they had no choice but to also leave the LGC community after cutting ties with Takoyaki. The experiences of these Storytellers cast a light on what was happening in the shadows at LGC. The silencing of these Storytellers, who were all at one point heavily involved in the LGC community, demonstrates the limits of LGC's ability to respond to the exploitation of women in the industry.

[47] Similar to the LGC member who created the "stomping on babies" game that I talked about in Chapter 5.
[48] To protect the Storytellers identities, I speak in very general terms and only give specific examples where I have the permission of the Storyteller to.

**LGC-Takoyaki: Feminism in Service to Capitalism**

As I've argued above, LGC is a part of the industry pipeline and designed to train women to enter the games/tech industry in ways that are minimally disruptive to the status quo. The structure of LGC supports and highlights feminisms that are focused on inclusion and women's empowerment, where professionalization is as much a component of empowerment as community building. These feminisms are in service to corporate capitalism, which can be seen in the ways in which Takoyaki derives benefits from their arrangement with LGC. LGC draws women into the Takoyaki space, which is seemingly benign but ultimately extractive to the benefit of Takoyaki: novice women game makers are an 'untapped market' and LGC provides a pool of potential clients for Takoyaki's services. Offering women free workspace works to demonstrates Takoyaki's commitment to creating an inclusive industry and being a 'safe space' for women, drawing even more women (and potential clients) into the space. This is a cycle where LGC (the pipeline) continually funnels women directly into Takoyaki (the industry). In the LGC-Takoyaki space, what registers as feminism is empowering oneself to 'stake a claim' in the games industry and be economically successful. Feminisms that reject the goals of professionalization or capitalism do not register as resistance and are subject to discipline.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

This study provides a deep dive into an explicitly feminist women-in-games organization to show the diverse range of feminisms circulating within the tech community, how and why some feminisms come to dominate, as well as shed light on the invisible, hidden feminist practices that might not otherwise be documented. Lady Game Club (LGC) exists in the tensions between the promises of the contemporary feminist movement and of the extractive forces of techno-capitalism. Throughout this study, I have been working in between these two spaces to make sense of LGC, pulling on the different threads of the Storytellers' experiences to examine the promises and limits of popular feminism in the EDI era of games. In this chapter, I stitch these threads back together by returning to the three research questions I posed in Chapter 4 to summarize my findings: 1) What are the feminist logics of LGC and how do they structure the political and the social? 2) What feminisms are the most visible and what feminisms are obscured on the LGC platform? And 3) what registers as feminist resistance at LGC? I conclude the chapter by discussing the limits of LGC's "platform power" (Singh, 2021) for creating an inclusive and equitable games industry, the potential of the "ambivalent spaces" of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), and future directions for feminist intersectional research on marginalized communities in games.

## Showcasing Ongoing Inequality: The Feminist Logics of the LGC Platform

LGC frames itself as a platform that has the power to "transform our communities, and positively impact policies and practice" (LGC, 2014, n.p.). Platforms are not neutral spaces where politics simply play out. The logics of the platform produce the politics and in turn organize and structure the political and the social (Singh, 2021). Using Singh's (2021) theory of

platform feminism, I apply the logics of platforms (as media objects that raise, to elevate, and make visible), as well as the neoliberal, post-feminist, and popular feminist logics of LGC (to empower individual women), to analyze how LGC (as a platform) extends power, as well as the limits of this power.

Platforms have long been framed as necessary for a kind of empowerment (Singh & Sharma, 2029). However, contrary to this understanding of the platform (as a way to signal empowerment), visibility via the platform is not always about liberation or giving someone a voice. Rinka Singh and Sarah Banet Weiser (2022) contend that that "platforms are central to facilitating the expansion of decentralized power and sustaining inequality among those who mount them" (Singh & Banet-Weiser, 2022, p. 166). As such, what the platform makes visible is not liberation, but ongoing inequality.

The feminisms that are the most visible at LGC are the ones that are friendly to and aligned with the goals of techno-capitalism. Popular feminism, as defined by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018), with its underlying post-feminist and neoliberal logics, is what enables LGC to exist as both a feminist space and as tech space. As a 'feminist space,' there is a diverse range of feminist discourses and practices circulating within LGC, although the feminisms that are the most visible are the ones that do not name or challenge systemic oppressions. As a 'tech space,' LGC is designed to get more women into the games industry, but in ways that do not challenge existing power structures. LGC is designed to empower individual women, not support women's liberation from systems of oppression. Put another way, LGC is designed to get more women into the games industry, but not to change it.

Throughout my analysis in Chapters 5 and 6, I have demonstrated how the popular feminist logics of LGC reproduces the same existing systemic inequities that organize the games

industry within the LGC space. For example, LCG's volunteer model of labour creates barriers for participation and works to maintain gender, racial and class hierarchies. It is white and middle-class women who end up benefitting the most from LGC's programming. LGC is an empowering space for *some* women game makers (the women who already have access to some form of privilege within the games industry), but not all game makers. LGC's platform feminism enables some women to rise up above others, and this is the ongoing equality that is made visible by LGC.

**Feminist Resistance at LGC**

LGC foregrounds neoliberal, post-feminist, and popular feminist discourses that emphasize women's individual empowerment and disciplines aspiring women game makers into becoming ideal neoliberal subject. Feminist resistance in the form of skills development (competence and confidence building) is the game industry's most desired form of women's activism, because it is non-disruptive and friendly to the status quo. The platform feminism of LGC elevates and amplifies popular feminism's normative modes of feminist resistance, which contributes to the rise of 'women's individual empowerment' as the dominant form of feminist resistance in the games industry. This means that other forms of feminist resistance that are happening in the space can often go unaccounted for. These are often the tactics and strategies of those who seek to resist dominant power structures. At LGC, for example, resistance that was based in survival, care, and refusal was practiced by Storytellers in at least three different ways: 1) refusal by racialized and low-income game makers to undertake unpaid labour, 2) refusal by a non-binary person to choose a gender in order to receive a LGC membership, and 3) refusal by an artist to, as she put it, "participate in this dog show" by practicing a business pitch for a game

she had no intention of selling or pitching to anyone. These examples of Storytellers' refusals to participate in LGC under these terms is also a refusal to participate in the techno-capitalist system. These refusals are not rendered as legible forms of feminist resistance and go unaccounted for, limiting the possibilities for feminist political action at LGC, such as collective action.

**The Limits of LGC's Platform Power**

LGC stands out against other women-in-tech organizations because it was an explicitly feminist space and positions itself as politically engaged in the battle against sexism and racism in the games industry. The feminist logics of LGC are based on a premise that gender equality has been achieved and therefore collective action or liberation is no longer needed. Gender and racial oppression are framed not as a systemic issue, but an individual one. For example, the continuing inequities in the games-tech industry are caused by the sexist and racist actions of individual outliers, and these issues can be resolved by removing the offending individual. Additionally, some of the Storytellers understand and speak about their experiences with oppression in this way, too. For example, when Storytellers talk about gender oppression, the discussion is focused on the intentions and behaviours of the individual men who come to in the LGC space rather than patriarchy. This focus on the individual not only obscures the systemic nature of oppression, but also puts the responsibility on individuals to fix oppression. For example, white and heterosexual Storytellers' discussions about racism and transphobia are focused on what they can do as individuals to be better allies, and not about combatting structural forms of oppression, such as the barriers that exist within LGC that keep marginalized persons form fully participating in the community.

Framing feminist political action as an individual politics limits the power of the platform to support collective action. Collective action struggles to materialize at LGC because the underlying neoliberal, postfeminist, and popular feminist logics of LGC works to contain feminist action to the individual. By positioning the individual as a site of political action, the organization forecloses the possibility of collective action or thinking about oppression as systemic or 'built in' (Benjamin, 2019). LGC's platform feminism does not render collective action as a possible form of resistance. That is why when a coordinated campaign of popular misogyny like Gamergate occurs, the organization is unable to respond.

**Gamergate as a Recurring Event**

As noted in Chapter 2, Gamergate represents popular misogyny's reaction to the progressive and feminist discourse that was emerging during the game industry's EDI era. As the embedded researcher and community member, I witnessed how Gamergate was source of stress and distress for members of LGC; many were affected both directly (as targets of online harassment) and indirectly (knowing someone who was targeted or being afraid of becoming a target). While this study did not ask Storytellers to talk about their experiences with Gamergate specifically, many pointed to Gamergate as an example of the deeply entrenched sexism and misogyny of the games industry, and to highlight the importance of creating community spaces where women game makers could gather safely.

Gamergate called attention to the systemic nature of women's oppression in the industry. Like many other women-in-games organizations, LGC made public statements condemning the attacks on women game makers. However, LGC also downplayed and framed Gamergate as the actions of a small vocal minority (a few bad apples), ignoring how it is the sexist conditions that

are created by the industry that enables the explosive misogyny of Gamergate to happen in the first place. Framing Gamergate as a bug, and not a feature of the system, helps maintain the techno-capitalist illusion that the games industry is a meritocracy where women can also thrive, and also obscures the fact that popular misogyny is mainstream and has real world consequences.

To be clear, I am not accusing the organization of condoning or being complicit in the abuse of women game makers during Gamergate. Rather, the point I am trying to make here is that LGC was not designed to support a collective response to such a horrific event in the first place. LGC is focused on women's inclusion in the industry and fighting sexism through direct representation, not dismantling systems of oppression. LGC was built on a postfeminist promise that gender equality has been achieved, that sexism and misogyny of the games industry is in the rearview mirror, and the games industry is now welcoming to women. LGC is not designed to respond to an event that, according to its underlying popular feminist logics, should not be possible in the first place.

But at the time of writing this conclusion (March 2024), a second Gamergate is currently underway. The resurgence of a second Gamergate is evidence that the games industry's EDI problems are indeed systemic. And until the root issue is addressed, we can almost certainly count on more Gamergates in the future. Moreover, it is important to note that events like Gamergate are not unique to the games industry or contained to Silicon Valley. Popular misogyny is networked and mainstream, and games is just one of many areas that the supporters of alt-right political ideologies seek to defend from progressive values (Bezio, 2018). It is not coincidental that a second Gamergate is happening during an election year when Donald Trump is once again a Presidential candidate. Popular misogyny is a zero-sum game where the loss of white patriarchal power must be reclaimed from feminism. Creating spaces that can support a

collective feminist politics, one that unites different groups that are all affected by patriarchy, are crucial for creating structural change that can improve the lives of *all* women, not just some.

**The Messiness of Popular Feminism: Creating Ambivalent Spaces**

The findings of this study are not meant to be read as an indictment of LGC for not being feminist enough or failing to do feminism correctly. There is no one authentic feminism that cancels another one out and there is no wrong way to do feminism or be a feminist. The contributions of popular feminism in games should not be thought of as politically vacuous. Rather, it can and should be understood through a lens of ambivalence (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Banet-Weiser (2018) notes the potential of the "ambivalent spaces" of popular feminism for enabling a collective politics and mobilizing feminist practice:

> It is ambivalence-both in my own intellectual critique of popular feminism and in the ambivalent spaces these politics create--that is the feminist project for me. Because of this ambivalence, it is unproductive to simply dismiss popular feminism as just another branding exercise that serves the ever-expanding reach of neoliberal markets, or to try to determine the authenticity of certain feminisms over others. Rather, the overlaps and intersections of affect, desire, critique, and ambivalence that characterize popular feminism are potentially opening spaces for, and connections to, mobilizing feminist practice. (preface)

The experiences of the Storytellers show how some members were engaged in forms of resistance that were based on care and survival. And while these forms of resistance may be read

as illegible by the LGC platform, they are indeed still happening, demonstrating the messy feminism that was happening within the LGC space. LGC was a space where critical and intersectional feminist practice can and does occur. It created opportunities for feminisms that push back and against the normalization of neoliberal patriarchal capitalism and carries potential for feminist political action to be heard. It provided women with opportunities to connect and share stories of oppression. It was a space to learn about feminism, think about how feminism could be practiced, and made feminist theory accessible and relatable to women's everyday life. The conversations about intersectional feminism that occurred between members was highly valued for the ways in encouraged personal growth, with one Storyteller expressing their gratitude to another Storyteller during an interview session:

> "I'm glad that you're here, because as we're talking about learning from other people, since you've been here I've learned so much about other people and myself. And you're definitely one of the people I think about when I think about "wow, I'm really becoming a different person because of the things I am learning and the people I am talking to" and you're one of the people who springs to mind."
>
> "Thank you. That is very kind of you to say and it makes me happy to hear it."

As noted by Sarah Banet-Weiser, Catherine Rottenberg, and Rosalind Gill (2020), "popular feminism... provides the opening to map a different logic of being the world than what is dictated by an idealized masculine sovereign subject" (p. 19). The LGC platform produces a

public and popular awareness of feminism in games. It creates an opening in the public's imagination of an equitable games industry - one that that is friendly to women. The messiness of LGC's feminism creates an ambivalent space that opens up the platform to other possibilities and potentials of feminism in the realm of techno-capitalism, and this should not be dismissed.

**Examining Marginalized Game Communities: Current Work and Future Directions**

In recent years, the field of feminist game studies has experienced a steady uptake in intersectional work, particularly around gender and race. This body of work centers the experiences of marginalized players and game makers as they navigate their gendered and racialized identities while challenging the dominant norms of games culture, often through creating communities that sustain them. Our scholarly understandings of how gender intersects with race (and with other identities such as sexuality and disability, etc.) in games culture and has benefitted immensely from the productive and generative work of Kishonna Gray (2014, 2018, 2020). Gray's highly influential research illustrates how studies of intersectionality can meaningfully interrogate how race and other social locations contribute to the representation and experiences of marginalized players. Over the last decade, Gray (2014, 2018, 2020) has demonstrated how despite the normalization of whiteness and masculinity in games, online communities and spaces built by marginalized players "have the potential to foster the development of a group standpoint, negating the impact of the dominant ideology." (Gray, 2014, p. 76). For example, in her groundbreaking study on lesbian Black and Latinx women gamers on *Xbox Live*, Gray (2018) documents and examines how these players resist the toxicity of online gaming communities through building their own community space. In telling the stories of marginalized players, Gray (2014, 2018, 2020) is a leading voice amongst intersectional feminist

scholars who are providing a critical corrective to notions of gaming as a predominantly white and male space.

Intersectional feminist game researchers are also challenging dominant ideologies in historical studies of the industry, where there is a tendency to frame video game history as only pioneered by white male innovation. For example, in their 'mixtape of Black feminist thought,' Russworm and Blackmon (2020) blend music, interviews, and critical analysis to demonstrate some of the ways in which Black women have impactfully engaged with the video game industry. By prioritizing the voices of Black women's lived experiences with games, they argue that Black feminist thought has always informed the ways in which Black women have worked and played within the industry.

Another significant contribution of intersectional game studies scholarship is showcasing how Black, Indigenous, racialized, and 2SLGBQT+, game makers are representing their communities in games (Grace, 2021; Bird, 2021a; LaPensée, 2014; LaPensée et. al., 2022; Pow, 2021; Shaw, 2019). Gamer makers, artists, and activists are making games that both reflect the lives, values, and experiences of marginalized players and engage in advocacy for social change. Scholars like Lindsay Grace, Adrienne Shaw, and Whit Pow, are curating and cataloging the experience and work of Black (Grace, 2021), queer (Shaw, 2019), and trans (Pow, 2021) game makers to understand their experiences and also highlight the cultural, artistic, and educational value of these games. Similarly, Indigenous scholars like Ashlee Bird and Elizabeth LaPensée are showcasing how Indigenous frameworks (Bird, 2021b) and involving Indigenous people in game design (LaPensée et. al., 2022) can help center Indigenous ways of knowing in game design and game representation.

Understanding the role and impact of community in sustaining marginalized groups and challenging dominant ideologies in games is nascent and evolving area of feminist game studies scholarship. Although this body of work has primarily focused on studying online spaces and communities thus far,[49] the methodological approaches and findings are invaluable for informing future directions for examining offline communities that also value and seek to advance marginalized interests and viewpoints. Offline community-based interventions that seek to diversify the games industry are an important part of the EDI landscape and the games industry pipeline, and therefore it is crucial that they be examined and interrogated. Moreover, this kind of community engagement must be "recognized as a form of scholarly practice and critical making (and not the making of novel objects but of engaged political subjects)" (Voorhees, et. al., 2024, p.21).

**Page Not Found: The LGC Described Here No Longer Exists.**

In 2024, EDI and women's empowerment continues to be celebrated in the games industry. The mission to get more girls and women into tech fields has not waned, and empowering girls to acquire technical skills is still framed as an important endeavor for their future career prospects. Large multi-national game studios and technology companies declare their commitment to supporting underrepresented groups and diversifying their workforce, however reports of toxic work culture and harassment continue to make headlines, and marginalized game makers are still underrepresented in the workforce. Despite an increased

[49] The vast affordances, public nature, and proliferation of online communities make it easier to conduct research in online spaces than offline spaces, which are fewer and can be more difficult for researchers to access (to name a few barriers).

awareness of underlying sexism and condemnation of misogynist behaviours, these problems are systemic in nature, and will continue until there is structural change.

LGC is representative of 'women in tech' initiatives, many of which are also platforms for popular feminism and engaged in the same "add women and stir" strategies to addressing sexism (Sarkeesian, 2023). Even though LGC was not designed to overtly challenge systemic oppressions, it is also an ambivalent space that creates openings and carries potential for mobilizing feminist practice. Critical conversations and quiet forms of resistance *were* occurring at LGC, demonstrating the need for spaces where collective political work can happen and be adequately supported.

While I was writing this dissertation, the LGC website was under (re)construction and replaced with a single sentence: "Page not found." For over 10 years, the LGC website had been an archive of the history of the organization, documenting every workshop, event, game jam, names of committee members, and programs that had occurred in the LGC since 2012. When the website came back online in early 2024, it was entirely new, and there was no trace of the 'old' LGC anywhere. The blog has been completely erased. The codex of games that showcased the games made by the community was no longer available. The dozens of webpages that documented the history of the organization had been replaced by a single webpage that contained a welcome message from the newly elected board of directors and a new mission statement.

The LGC that has been documented in this research no longer exists. The organization has undergone major changes to its structure and mission. Most notably, LCG operates independently from Takoyaki Studios and has completely cut ties with the co-working space. The organization now operates fully online and offers programs remotely. LGC has expanded its mission beyond supporting only women to include all marginalized game developers. It is still a

feminist space, but now an explicitly intersectional feminist space. The board of directors is no longer solely a group of white women, and the volunteers are paid for their labour.

The LGC of 2024 did not emerge in a vacuum. Its evolution was influenced by the critical feminist conversations that were happening within the community over the last decade. The feminisms of LGC were messy and occurred within the nooks and crannies of an extractive techno-capitalist space. The Storytellers I spoke with were constantly reconfiguring their feminist relationships with each other, with themselves, and with LGC. The need to constantly reconfigure ways of convening should be read as a practice of political resistance in (Singh, 2021), one that can, over time, may result in shifting the logics in which feminist platforms are built upon to ones that less friendly to techno-capitalism and more conducive to collective action.

## Post-Script

Like the 'new and improved' LGC of 2024, I too am a different person from when I started this research, and my experiences at LGC inform who I am today. When I started this research in 2012, it was exhilarating to be a part of building a community, to help women who dreamed of becoming professional game makers enter the industry, and to talk about feminism and creating an inclusive industry. But by 2016, after four years of bearing witness to other women's pain and trauma, I was completely drained. I was unable to make sense of my work and I lost my sense of purpose as a researcher. Like the Storytellers who practiced feminist resistances based in care, I also needed to take a break and step away. At that time, stopping my research felt like I had failed as a feminist. It took me a long time to fully appreciate and understand Audre Lourde's (1988) famous quote: "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." (p. 131)

It's difficult to make sense of traumatic events while they are still happening, and I could not have written this dissertation in 2016. It took years for me to reconfigure how I wanted to 'reconvene' with my research data and how to share the Storytellers experiences without putting anyone at risk. My dissertation is full of reminders of how the games industry can be extremely unfriendly and unwelcoming to outspoken feminists, and if I am honest, I am still nervous about publishing anything with the words "feminism in games" and "Gamergate" in it. But I am also compelled to document this small slice of feminist history. Like so many other women who were a part of this community, being a part of LGC changed my life too, and my experiences during this time continues to inform how I think of myself as a researcher, as a community organizer, and as a feminist. Most importantly, being a part of LGC gave me the opportunity to listen to and learn from the Storytellers; to bear witness to their struggles and to document their experiences.

It is a great honour and privilege to be trusted to (finally) tell their stories alongside my own. I hope I have done them justice.

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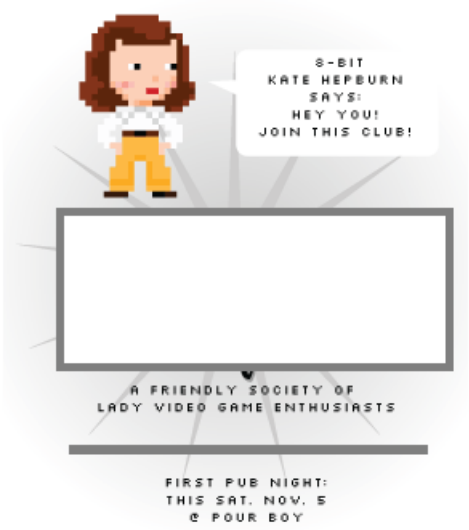
**Appendix A: Handbill for the first LGC social that was distributed on social media**

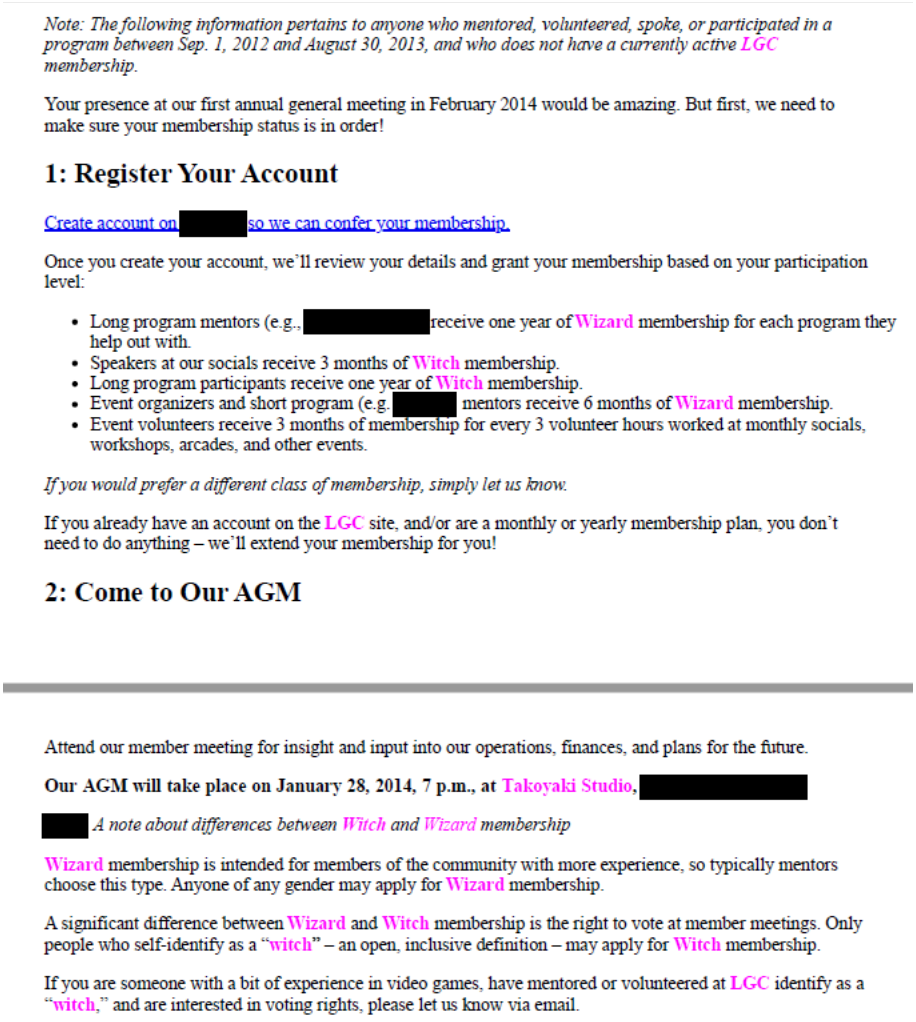


## Appendix B: DGI/LGC Timeline of Events 2011-2012

| Program/Event | Location | Date |
|---|---|---|
| Diversity in Games Initiative (DGI) | Bell TIFF Lightbox | Aug 2011 – Nov 2011 |
| DGI alumni self-organizes a showcase @ Digifest under the newly formed Lady Game Club (LGC) | George Brown College | Oct 2011 |
| LGC Meet up Social 1 | Pour Boy (bar) | Nov 2011 |
| January 4-week incubator | Site3 (w/ open work sessions at Takoyaki Studio) | Jan 2012 |
| January game exhibition | DPAD | Feb 2012 |
| LGC Meet up Social 2 | Takoyaki Studio | Feb 2012 |
| LGC Speaker Social 1 | Takoyaki Studio | March 2012 |
| LGC Speaker Social 2 | Takoyaki Studio | April 2012 |
| LGC Speaker Social 3 | Takoyaki Studio | May 2012 (me) |
| LGC Speaker Social 4 | Takoyaki Studio | June 2012 |
| LGC Speaker Social 5 | Takoyaki Studio | July 2012 |
| July 4 -week make your first game incubator | Takoyaki Studio | July/Aug 2012 |
| The New Game Makers: 6-week speaker and workshop series ed by women games professionals | Takoyaki Studio | July/Aug 2012 |
| July games showcase | Takoyaki Studio | Aug 2012 |
| LGC Speaker Social 6 | Takoyaki Studio | Sept 2012 |
| LGC founded as an incorporated not-for-profit; launches a website and membership program | Takoyaki Studio | Sept 2012 |
| Digifest – LGC/Takoyaki Studio “Open Arcade” | George Brown College | Oct 2012 |
| LGC Speaker Social 7 | Takoyaki Studio | Oct 2012 |
| November ‘mentor-accelerated’ incubator (2 weekends/24hr game jam) | Takoyaki Studio | Nov 2012 |
| “Stand Up and Share” workshop on effective public speaking | Takoyaki Studio | Nov 2012 |
| November Incubator Showcase | Takoyaki Studio | Dec 2012 |

## Appendix C: LGC Membership Model

Below is a screenshot of a blog post on the LGC website inviting members to participate in the 2014 Annual General Meeting. The LGC Membership Model – categories of membership, and how one can become a member – is outlined in the blog post. I have redacted and edited the original document in bold pink where required to maintain anonymity.



*Note: The following information pertains to anyone who mentored, volunteered, spoke, or participated in a program between Sep. 1, 2012 and August 30, 2013, and who does not have a currently active LGC membership.*

Your presence at our first annual general meeting in February 2014 would be amazing. But first, we need to make sure your membership status is in order!

### 1: Register Your Account

Create account on [redacted] so we can confer your membership.

Once you create your account, we'll review your details and grant your membership based on your participation level:

- Long program mentors (e.g., [redacted] receive one year of Wizard membership for each program they help out with.
- Speakers at our socials receive 3 months of Witch membership.
- Long program participants receive one year of Witch membership.
- Event organizers and short program (e.g. [redacted] mentors receive 6 months of Wizard membership.
- Event volunteers receive 3 months of membership for every 3 volunteer hours worked at monthly socials, workshops, arcades, and other events.

*If you would prefer a different class of membership, simply let us know.*

If you already have an account on the LGC site, and/or are a monthly or yearly membership plan, you don't need to do anything – we'll extend your membership for you!

### 2: Come to Our AGM

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Attend our member meeting for insight and input into our operations, finances, and plans for the future.

**Our AGM will take place on January 28, 2014, 7 p.m., at Takoyaki Studio, [redacted]**

[redacted] *A note about differences between Witch and Wizard membership*

Wizard membership is intended for members of the community with more experience, so typically mentors choose this type. Anyone of any gender may apply for Wizard membership.

A significant difference between Wizard and Witch membership is the right to vote at member meetings. Only people who self-identify as a "witch" – an open, inclusive definition – may apply for Witch membership.

If you are someone with a bit of experience in video games, have mentored or volunteered at LGC identify as a "witch," and are interested in voting rights, please let us know via email.