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The Games Men Play:
How Two-Year College Men Use Video Games to Construct Masculinity

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Abstract: Video games are cultural artifacts that promote learning and development. This study sought to examine how male students enrolled at two-year institutions of higher education use video games to construct their masculinity. Additionally, it challenges the assumption that video games offer little to no educational benefits and it challenges the stereotypes associated with playing video games.

Problem Statement
The problem addressed through this study concerns the lack of understanding between the relationship between two-year college male college students’ development of masculinity and their lived experiences playing video games. Currently, the notion is that video games hinder men and their development (Kimmel, 2008); however, there is a significant body of work analyzing learning that occurs within video game communities (Gee, 2004, Jenkins, 2008).

Purpose of Study
The purpose of this study is to research how two-year college men use video games to construct their masculinity. The study situated research at the intersection of college men and masculinity and video games to research and uncover gender constructions embedded in this overlooked aspect of popular culture. Better understanding the impact on learning and development was also a consideration. Thus, the study synthesized research from bodies of knowledge concerning hegemony, popular culture, and college men and masculinities to analyze how men at two-year institutions used video games to construct their masculinity.

Research Questions
This study used the following research questions to guide inquiries:
1. What do men experience when they play video games?
2. What cultural myths and archetypes about men and masculinity are produced or reproduced by video games?
3. How is masculinity constructed through experiencing video games?
4. What impact on learning is produced by video games and occurs through this construction and development of masculinity?
5. What role, if any, do two-year institutions of higher education serve within this construction of masculinity with video games?

Conceptual Framework
This study uses a conceptual framework rooted in the notion that culture can be used either to promote or to subvert hegemony. Video games are part of students’ lifeworld, and these games are used to construct students’ epistemology regarding social categories and concepts (Habermas, 1985). This construction, in turn, affects their meaning-making structures and lens used to view the world. Thus, issues of hegemonic control are central to the warrant for the study and the framework used to conduct it.
Hence, certain habits are replicated and imitated to become part of the cultural norming process. They are internalized and repeated with no thought or critical reflection about their meaning or action; men fight because that is what men do. These traditional elements of masculinity become what Connell (2005) defines as hegemonic masculinity: they are the assumed traits and values of being a man that are neither questioned nor critically examined by society. Thus, this is why examination of representations of masculinity are necessary: they challenge the power and prestige established by the hegemonic masculinity that allows it to continually reproduce and colonize the lifeworld. In order for men to challenge hegemonic masculinity, they must encounter cultural artifacts that show hegemonic masculinity being challenged.

As such, gamers use information in the video games as cultural repositories to replicate habits and action encountered in the game. The games, as cultural artifacts, function as referents to socially constructed definitions, many of which are based on myths and archetypes. Vygotsky (1978) theorizes that cultural texts allow for semiotic mediation as learners bring their cultural position to a text and are influenced by that text. Thus, according to this belief, gamers can bring their unique life experiences to these texts in which they interact with other cultural groups. This interaction allows for the deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural knowledge. Gamers both contribute to this body of knowledge and are changed by it.

Methodology

Design of Study
The design of this study was qualitative methodology, specifically critical discourse analysis, to capture data provided by the participants. This qualitative methodology was employed to gather thick data and rich descriptions to fully understand and conceptualize how social values, masculinity in particular, are constructed and developed in these communities. Through immersion via semi-structured interviews about the participants’ lived experiences, a composite picture of their social positionality and viewpoint emerged through this methodology.

Population
For this study, I used a targeted population method to gather an initial list of participants. From this initial list, a snowball sampling method was employed to gather additional participants for the study. The targeted population was college men currently enrolled within a two-year institution who self-identify as playing video games. This population consisted of 13 participants who were enrolled at a two-year school. They were all white men, and 11 of the participants were between the ages of 21 and 26. The other remaining participants were over 30. One had children. 5 of the participants were returning students, having admitted to attending another institution prior to the current institution.

Data Collection
Interviews were conducted in public or in semi-public spaces. Questions were designed according to tools outlined in Gee’s (2011) Critical Discourse Analysis. The intent was to establish the participant within the discourse and then illicit data about their experiences and connections made to other discourses. Oral interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length and tape recorded to ensure validity. Interviews were necessary in order to ask probing questions that elicited deeper information from participants. Interviews were tape recorded, and a transcriptionist was hired. Additionally, significant hand gestures or body movements were recorded and documented.
Transcripts were coded using a constant-comparative method to note particular themes and patterns emerging from the data. The data was then open, focused, and axial coded. Additionally, data was marked to indicate changes in tone or emphasis within the interview. Emphasized words were italicized, whereas deemphasized words were bolded. Significant gestures were also noted. After coding, member checks occurred to verify accuracy in the data and reduce any drift or misinformation occurring throughout the process.

Findings

The following themes emerged from the data. First, multiple forms of masculinity were developed and challenged through experiences within the video game discourse. No single construction of masculinity emerged as dominant in the discourse. These constructions of masculinity, however, impacted other discourse communities, particularly work and college. Second, a diverse array of skills and concepts were developed from playing video games. Along with cognitive development, participants noted metacognitive and affective skills developed via playing video games. Many participants noted learning through the strong social networks developed in these video games, and they connected this learning to the workplace and classroom settings. Data also challenged stereotypes about men and video games. Lastly, the data indicated that two-year institutions of higher education do not use video games to promote learning and development.

Implications

Participants rejected the notion that video games are a negative influence on their growth and development. Stereotypes about men and gamers were challenged, too. Many participants used the term ‘responsibility’ during the interviews, and this term connected to playing video games, too. There also are critical applications as well for this connection, because issues of responsibility could be subjected to hegemony, power, and control. Importantly, this concept of responsibility should be used to promote positive and healthy habits that are replicated within the discourse community. An avenue for future research would be to investigate how to transfer skills and knowledge from video games to other discourses associated with work and academics. The concept of ‘responsibility’ also crossed over to constructions of masculinity, too. Participant frequently explored how a concept of responsibility was central to their idea of masculinity. This concept and connection between responsibility and masculinity should be explored further.

This research pushes the boundaries of adult learning and video games. While much of research into video games and learning concerns formal learning environment (Barab, et al., 2010; Barab, et. al., 2009), studies should push into social and informal learning environments. Using Wright and Sandlin’s (2009; 2008) and Gee and Hayes’ (2010) work as a model, future studies can explore community-building aspects within the discourse, and how knowledge and habits are transferred out of it. Based upon the provided data, much of the learning occurs outside the boundaries of formal learning. More so, studies of popular culture and learning should also be expanded to include video games—they are a part of the popular culture semiosphere. They are participatory in nature (Jenkins, 2007) and should be treated as part of the public pedagogy, too.
References