

Where the Women Are(n't): Gender and a North American 'Pro-gaming' Scene

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This paper draws from my doctoral research with a community of competitive Halo 3 players, an ethnography of local, national and international digital gaming tournaments that explores the professionalization of digital play, orchestrated by an emergent 'e-Sports' industry. The research for the paper makes use of audio-visual clips of team-based competitive Halo 3 tournament play at three different sites – a small-scale Toronto-based LAN tournament, a 2008 Major League Gaming (MLG) event, and the 2008 World Cyber Games (WCG) in Cologne, Germany – to examine how, when and where gender is enacted as players engage in emergent forms of digital play that are discursively framed, and aggressively marketed, as sport.

I begin by briefly charting a competitive gaming industry comprised of corporate-sponsored gaming leagues and tournaments, focusing particularly on Major League Gaming (MLG), a North American organization attempting to create and sustain a market for televised 'professional' gameplay. MLG's promotional strategies invoke the symbols and organizational models of a mainstream North American sports-media industry, a process of legitimation, I argue, that operates by connecting two domains – gaming and sport - in which women continue to be only marginal players. As a result, the possibilities for female participation in competitive gaming – including a share of its rewards - are volatile at best.

This argument is developed in analyses of four audio-visual clips taken during my work with a Canada-based community of Halo 3 gamers, as I followed these aspiring 'pros' to the 2008 MLG Toronto Open and the 2008 WCG tournament in Germany. I use the Multimodal Application Program (MAP: see Taylor and de Castell, 2005; Taylor, 2008) to conduct visual analyses of participants' embodied interactions with one another and the technological infrastructure of the events. Drawing from theories of gender "performativity" (Butler, 1999; Connell, 2005) I explore how these interactions threaten, or affirm and re-produce, the ongoing masculinization of digital technologies (Wjacman, 1991) – technologies that, in the context of a North American competitive gaming scene, provide the apparatuses for this emergent 'sport'.

Each clip depicts women participating in overwhelmingly male-dominated LAN tournaments – carrying out, in a small way, what some have identified as the imperative for socio-cultural studies of gaming to make "visible" the agency of women in normally masculinized gaming technocultures (Taylor, 2006). In two clips, I focus on the single female player who regularly attended the local club I worked with, examining how her status as a competent, even dominant, gamer is threatened by a misogynistic discourse that characterizes male players' interactions with one another – a discourse that has little to do with the game itself.

The other two clips portray forms of participation that are far more common (and 'safe') for women at the tournaments I observed: spectatorship and promotional modeling. The first shows a woman at an MLG tournament who refers to herself as her son's 'cheerleader', despite having funded her son's team – less

'cheerleader', more general manager. The second, from the 2008 World Cyber Games Tournament in Germany, shows two 'booth babes' modeling a sports car-themed exhibit, where male competitors face each other in a racing game while a crowd of male spectators looking on. The presence of these highly-sexualized women ensures for attendees that their heterosexual desire is firmly secured and on display.

I argue that while the female gamer's competent play might transgress a normative gender order that configures competitive gaming – and its rewards – as an exclusively male-dominated sphere, these latter forms of participation support young men's access to, and mastery of, the digital games involved. They operate within, and help reproduce, a discourse that presents pro gaming as sport, whose forms of 'virtual' athleticism, i.e. the skills required for elite competitive Halo play, are framed as the exclusive domain of male bodies. My analysis offers a view of North American competitive gaming in which young women are more than capable of 'playing with the boys'. At the same time, the "gendered landscapes" (Bryce and Rutter, 2006) of these events, in which women are more often positioned as 'cheerleaders', 'booth babes', or even worse, 'Halo hoes', offers the female players who do participate few opportunities or incentives for trying to 'go pro'.

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