Man Caves and the Fantasy of Homosocial Escape

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INTRODUCTION
Notions of escape have long permeated accounts of digital play. Games continue to be portrayed as technologies of pleasurable dislocation, enabling temporary visits to worlds that are more alluring, empowering, or at least, fair, than our everyday lives.

Such notions have been thoroughly problematized by (primarily feminist and/or ethnographic) research that insists on the imbrication of games in the contexts of their play, and in the power relations that shape these experiences (Consalvo, 2009; Taylor, 2006). But there is something indispensable about approaching gaming as an escape, particularly when we shift our perspective away from games *themselves*, towards the spaces and times of play. The capacity to experience gaming unfettered from the demands of so-called everyday life *is* possible, but has historically been a privilege primarily afforded to men and boys (Jenson and de Castell, 2008). Neither 'magic' nor particularly 'circular', these experiences of escape are produced through processes that are always gendered, raced, and classed, and cannot therefore be explained through psychologistic concepts like 'flow' and 'immersion'. Such architectures of exclusion and transportation appear throughout critical accounts of play, from arcades in the 1980s (Kocurek, 2015; Tobin, 2016) to LAN parties in the 2000's (Taylor et al., 2014) to today's esports team houses (Orlando, 2016). Attending to more mundane gaming sites, we can see this architecture enacted – or at least envisioned – by the 'man cave', the enclave of "technomasculinity" (Kocurek, 2015) at once part of, and removed from, the domestic sphere.

This presentation engages in a theoretical construction of gaming man caves, updating and extending existing research on domestic spaces of play (Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Chambers, 2012; Harvey, 2013; Simon, Silverman & Boudreau, 2009). Our theorization is driven by an empirical analysis of posts to online gaming forums. Using data gathered from the 2007 and 2015 editions of the online community NeoGAF's annual "Post your

setup" threads, in which members upload and comment on pictures of their domestic gaming arrangements, I address two concerns. First, what do these posts tell us about contemporary technomasculinity and its investment, on the one hand, in digitally mediated (homo)sociality and, on the other, in the allure of escape (Sharma, 2016)? Second, what has changed in the ways users portray their domestic gaming spaces between 2007 (1-2 years into the Xbox 360, Nintendo Wii, and Playstation 3 console generation), and 2015 (1-2 years into the current console generation), and how might these changes illuminate technomasculinity's shifting relationships to the instruments of its reproduction – to *the stuff* of the man cave?

Our goal is to begin working out the dual role of the gaming man cave as it is portrayed on NeoGAF: that is, as a "media apparatus" (Packer, 2013) that promises both belonging and escape. As an apparatus of *belonging*, post after post on the "gaming setup" threads show immaculately staged scenarios of homosocial bonding through technologies of leisure, even while no *people* are actually present in the shots. Building from the insight that man caves are often *unused* by anyone other than the owner himself, representing an unfulfilled "fantasy" of homosocial contact (Smith, 2016), we consider whether the numerous images depicting couches with multiple controllers laid out demonstrates something similar – documenting not so much a *reality* of fraternal bonding in the spaces portrayed, but its virtual enactment, a fantasy of shared play. In this view, the homosocial belonging promised by the gaming man cave occurs not (only) through *actual* play, but through the act of "posting your setup" to a community of fellow cave-men.

These threads also reproduce a much older discourse that articulates male leisure as a reprieve from the work of social reproduction. The masculine subject articulated throughout the "Post your setup" threads is one who seeks *escape* -- from the domestic relations that limit his play time, from the supposedly feminized domain of the home, and not infrequently, from the calls for inclusion and diversity currently reverberating through the worlds of technology and gaming.

Our presentation concludes by historicizing this cave-man, situating him within a trajectory of masculine subjectivities produced by (and for) specific technological milieus. In particular, we draw from Beatriz Preciado's *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics* (2014). Preciado explores the groundbreaking work *Playboy* magazine did in the 1950s and 1960s, envisioning its idealized subject – the bachelor – as a man whose agency and (sexual) power is obtained through his mastery over domestic technologies of surveillance and representation (the camera, the two-way mirror, the home movie theatre), particularly as (Western, white) women found employment, and political power, outside the home. Like today's gaming man cave, the "bachelor pad" constructed through the pages of *Playboy* was a thoroughly *mediated* environment, "an information-management center for the production of fictional media versions of the public sphere" (34).

While it is an oversimplification to see *Playboy*'s bachelor as the progenitor of the gaming cave-man animating the "Post your setup" threads, the connections and transformations between them can tell us much about the cultural politics of contemporary digital play. Like the bachelor pad, the man cave is a media nexus, an apparatus situated both in the home and in globalized networks of capital, data, and affects. But if the aim of the bachelor pad was the objectification of women via novel manipulations of representational media, the aim of the man cave is arguably to erase their *physical* presence altogether, to encounter them *only* through digital media.

Similarly, where *Playboy's* bachelor aimed for the extension of an unfettered early adulthood, the cave-man, for whom play *is* work, represents an indefinitely prolonged boyhood.

Like other fantasies of contemporary capitalism (Dean, 2005), the dual fantasies of belonging and escape associated with the gaming man cave operate to obscure the very grounds of their own production: in this case, the gendered labor associated with their upkeep. Therefore, a full theorization of the gaming man cave as a contemporary formation of gendered power must account of what the NeoGAF "Post your gaming setup" images, and other fantasies of ludic escape, *hide* from view.

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