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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Too close, too intimate, and too vulnerable: close reading methodology and the future of feminist game studies

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ABSTRACT

In this article I discuss close reading as a methodology for feminist game studies. Due to its centralization of the researcher's own interpretations, close reading can be a particularly fruitful methodology for marginalized scholars discussing the ways games construct, position, and portray their own identities. However, this intimacy can also result in vulnerability, in part because reactionary and conservative members of the gaming community continue to insist that video games should be “just for fun” and push back against reading “too much” into them. This pushback has been directed in particularly hostile ways towards feminist critics and scholars who interpret game narratives or characters as misogynistic, homophobic, or racist. Yet, in order to make positive change happen, more feminist research on games needs to reach the broader public and intimate social justice-oriented close reading must become normalized rather than niche. In this sense, close reading can be both a methodology and a political stance.

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Introduction

Video games occupy a fraught middle ground between art and toy, with many developers and players, and even scholars and critics, refusing to acknowledge the cultural importance of the medium and insisting that “it’s just a game.” But, like all media, games are loaded with meaning; they communicate messages, both symbolic and overt. Much of feminist game studies has been dedicated to unpacking and critiquing those messages, especially in terms of the representation of certain identities, and connecting them to issues within gamer culture and the games industry. Indeed, the rampant sexism, racism, and homophobia that taints the production and reception of games cannot be divorced from game content.

As I argue in this article, feminist game scholarship needs to spread beyond academia and into the public sphere as an important part of our efforts to create real change within gaming cultures and the games industry. In this sense, I’m building upon Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw’s (2015) work, especially their point that “the lack of understanding about academic research suggests a need for an accessible and public intellectualism that helps

to bridge the space between academia and non-academia” (p. 217). Specifically, this article is a discussion of social justice-oriented close reading in the context of feminist game studies and public-facing game scholarship/criticism. I begin by briefly outlining what close reading is and discussing the backlash that has always been directed at this kind of subjective and interpretive analysis. I then address the importance of close reading for feminist game studies while also considering the dangers researchers face by placing themselves within their work and centralizing questions of identity and social justice. Throughout, I call for feminist game scholars to make their close analyses accessible to the public, in terms of place of publication, medium, and writing style, so that theoretical concepts are made clear, careful media analysis is demonstrated, and social justice-oriented game criticism becomes normalized instead of niche. While there are certainly limits to what textual analysis methods like close reading can tell us about games (Kennedy, 2002), analyzing media objects reveals multifaceted ways that representation is intertwined with questions of justice. As Amanda Phillips (2018) has articulated, “there are many, many ways to do game studies for great justice” (p. 117) and in this article I explore why one of those ways—close reading of games, especially social justice-oriented work accessible to the public—is vital for the future of feminist game studies.

Too close

Close reading, or close textual analysis, is an established, traditional method within the field of media studies, and several game scholars have discussed the fruitful ways it can be employed to analyze games (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011; Brooker, 2001; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Fernández-Vara, 2014; Konzack, 2002). Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum (2011) describe close reading as “a continuous process of creating contingent meaning from potential meaning” that involves transforming “symbolic and representational input into meaningful ideation” (p. 2). In other words, the close reader unpacks the meanings embedded or encoded in mediated content, “reading” the content as though it were a text—a technique also known as rhetorical criticism.

Close reading, like all kinds of textual analysis, also centralizes the researcher’s (or the critic’s, viewer’s, or player’s) own interpretation of the mediated content, a long-established aspect of studying media (Kracauer, 1952). Critical understanding of a media text requires an interpretive analysis that goes beyond a surface-level reading, as Alison Harvey (2020) has discussed in her book *Feminist media studies*:

A close analysis of the signs, codes, and symbols of media texts and how they construct and present the world provides a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the functioning of representation than simply asserting that the presence of images of particular people indicates fairness, equality, or justice. (p. 41)

Social justice-oriented approaches to media analysis, such as those that employ feminist, queer, crip, or critical race theory, emphasize the centrality of identity and positionality in their interpretive analysis, and work to connect mediated messages to real world oppression.

Unfortunately, there has always been backlash against this kind of interpretive analysis from those who either object to the implications of, for example, a feminist or queer

reading of their favorite work or from creators who balk at the implication that they might embed their own implicit biases in the media they create. For example, Alexander Doty's (1993) efforts to interpret cinema through a queer lens were met with skepticism and accusations of "pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn't there" (p. vii). Yet, that latent, subtle, symbolic, connotative meaning communicates messages to audience members, even if those messages aren't necessarily obvious. This kind of backlash against close reading is familiar in game studies as well, with the now infamous incident of Janet Murray coming under fire from so-called "Ludologists" for her interpretive close reading of *Tetris* (see Murray, 1997, 2013). She was accused of interpretive violence and projecting her favorite content onto the game by one of the (male) "founders" of game studies, and her work continues to be criticized, even indirectly, by male scholars in their efforts to dictate what games should and should not be. In this sense, backlash against close reading—especially analysis focused on "controversial" topics like representational politics rather than more apparently "neutral" topics like mechanics or level design—can unfortunately be found in all areas of media studies.

Those who occupy a less privileged subject position and are conducting what D. A. Miller (2013) calls a "too-close reading" of media are forced into two roles: a confidant to whom the media object "whispers its closest secrets" and an overly suspicious or paranoid viewer worried that they're just projecting their own insecurities onto the media object (p. 27). The burden of subjective interpretation therefore necessitates that the too-close reader put a lot of effort into supporting their analysis—"proving" their interpretation inasmuch as that is possible. Since not all scholars have the luxury of a dedicated fanbase who will support them even if they are simply speculating on Twitter or can discuss issues of representation at a comfortable distance, researchers utilizing this methodology integrate established theoretical and conceptual frameworks in their analyses and provide ample evidence from the object under scrutiny. However, these are skills we learn and refine within the academy, especially graduate school, and so tend to remain unavailable to the general public. Indeed, as Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw's (2015) have discussed, "the opacity of what we do, how we do it, and the language we use is often so far removed from the publics we are discussing that academia, itself, becomes part of the problem" (p. 209). This is why, as I argue in this article, media scholars who are well versed in this practice and are engaging with complex and often misunderstood theories like feminist theory or critical race theory should, whenever possible, make their research accessible—in terms of cost, location, and writing—so that the practice of reading "between the lines" and underpinning that reading with clearly explained theories and concepts becomes more normalized for public audiences. While increased critical media literacy will not stop all vitriolic backlash and harassment from happening, the more people see careful feminist media criticism in action, the more familiar it will become, and, hopefully, that familiarity will result in lower rates of skeptical pushback and accusations of critics injecting their own "personal politics" into their analysis or seeing what "isn't there."

Too intimate

Elizabeth Freeman (2010) has argued that close reading is a queer process of unfolding: "to close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying, and to hold out that these

activities allow us to look both hard and askance at the norm” (p. xvii). This means that there is an inherent intimacy to not only the act of gameplay but also writing and presenting work. The critique of “that’s just your opinion” or “you only say that because you’re [insert identity marker here]” are unfortunately common—and not altogether untrue. Close reading is subjective, after all. We need to work to show why subjective analysis is not a problem and explain why no research can ever be “objective.” This might involve more carefully explaining how issues of media representation are tied to broader social structures and systemic oppression, and more collaboration between scholars using different methods to argue the same points. I am not suggesting that close reading needs to be “proven” by other methods, rather I feel there is no need for methodological divisions when it comes to feminist intervention—we should use whatever tools we have to communicate with the public and dismantle oppressive systems.

Regarding the close reading of games, intimate questions of identity and positionality are important because reactionary and conservative members of the gaming community have insisted that video games should be “just for fun” and pushed back against reading “too much” or “too deeply” into games and their meaning—just as Doty and Miller lamented regarding film criticism. This pushback has been directed in particularly hostile and violent ways towards feminist critics who interpret video game narratives or characters as misogynistic, such as in Anita Sarkeesian’s “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” series (2013–2017). But it has also been directed at feminist game scholars for their published research, the topics of their conferences, and even the content they teach, as has been discussed at length by Chess and Shaw (2015), A. D. Andrew (2016), Emma Vossen (2018), Tobias Van Veen (2014), and Katherine Cross (2016). As Shaw has stated, harassment campaigns like GamerGate and the hostility towards feminist game scholarship “makes us all have to decide whether or not we want to be public game scholars” (cited in Straumsheim, 2015). This is a difficult decision because, as A. D. Andrew (2016) laments,

there’s no way for women, for feminists, to critique games outside of some impossible notion of objectivity without becoming targets. To do the work at all is to become a target. We have to choose between silence and the acceptance of risk.

Even within the field of game studies—which has been critiqued as a male-dominated field often hostile to feminist scholarship—issues of exclusionary practices and gatekeeping arise. As Emma Vossen (2018) has discussed at length in her dissertation, “game studies itself embodies many of the same qualities that make games culture unwelcoming and inaccessible to women and non-binary people” (p. 185). Much of this disciplinary gatekeeping focuses on methods, and while close reading in general might be considered an acceptable or normalized method—especially considering the popularity of work by male game scholars such as Ian Bogost or the successful *Well Played* series published by ETC press—close reading attuned to questions of social justice, representation, and identity politics is still fraught. Indeed, whether housed inside the academy or published in public-facing venues, as Bonnie Ruberg (2019) has noted, close reading of video games “is still controversial work”:

The ever-looming accusation of “over-reading” continues to deter many would-be close readers from exploring games as textual objects (loosely termed) with significant attention to detail. This is especially true when it comes to interpreting games through socially engaged lenses. (pp. 56–57)

Backlash against reading meaning in games where it isn’t obviously present is unfortunately common and is a way of policing the supposed boundaries of belonging in gaming communities. As Murray has argued, the urge to “protect” games from feminist analysis is pervasive, with “GamerGaters, old-school cultural gatekeepers, [and] ludologist hard-liners” all alike in their desire to keep games away from “the cultural and narrative dimensions of representation” (cited in Margini, 2017). Performing a close reading of a game through socially engaged lenses is therefore part of an ongoing feminist battle:

The fight for the right to analyze video games closely, even in the face of the many perils of this work, is the fight to make our own meaning from games—to lay claim to the equal citizenship of those who are “different” in games cultures by understanding games on the terms and through the methods that we deem meaningful rather than those set and policed by the gamer status quo. (Ruberg, 2019, p. 61)

In this sense, close reading is both a methodology and a political stance, and we as feminist warriors—social justice warriors, if we choose to claim and redeem that title—can use it as part of our arsenal. More importantly, the more we perform this kind of intimate analysis for public audiences, the more normalized the act of reading between the lines will become, and, hopefully, the less we will be accused of reading “too much” into games or being part of some feminist or Marxist conspiracy (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Part of our task in fostering media literacy is to perform critical analysis for the public and explain our theoretical concepts in a clear, compelling, and accessible way.

Too vulnerable

A researcher’s understanding of the world is shaped by their social identities and the particular conditions in which their work was produced, and so knowledge should be situated rather than presented as objective or universal. This idea has deeply shaped feminist media studies, so our work on games must be grounded in a consideration of the social, cultural, and historical contexts of their production and reception and we, as researchers subject to the same power relations we are critiquing, “bring into the research process our embodied realities, our differently politicized subject positions, and uneven access to power in the social systems we are operating in” (Harvey, 2020, p. 38). While this central tenant of feminist research is a noble goal and important for pushing back against problematic claims about “objective” truth that have so long shaped academia, it inevitably means that, by putting ourselves within our work and making our own positionality and stake clear to our audience, we as feminist researchers make ourselves vulnerable.

I believe knowledge mobilization is a central component of feminist research, particularly if it is intended to be interventionist. There exists an unfortunate disconnect between academia and the fan communities and industries discussed in much feminist game studies research, and so circulating that work in more public forums—not just open access journals, but game journalism sites, Twitter threads, or YouTube videos, for example—is one of the only ways for academics to reach the broader public. Yet

there remains an inherent risk to sharing feminist game studies research in online public spaces. In her introduction to a special issue of *Ada* on feminist game studies, Nina Huntemann (2013) articulated that risk in reference to targeted harassment campaigns like GamerGate:

In a space where sexism and homophobia is performed and reproduced as if it is part of the digital code, feminist attention to video games and game culture is threatening. ... The mere suggestion that these cultural products are not the domains of white, heterosexual men unleashes a torrent of vicious border policing.

Much of the cultural criticism conducted by media scholars and critics is close reading—this includes analyzing media content, especially visual representations, narration, and dialogue, as well as paratextual materials in order to unpack their significance and the messages they communicate to audiences. While not all cultural criticism is risky, when the critic uses lenses attuned to issues of social justice, such as feminist theory, critical race theory, crip theory, or queer theory, they are, depending on the venue, likely to receive at least some backlash from readers (who, based on the content of their comments, are indeed likely to be white, heterosexual, abled men).

As Clara Fernández-Vara (2014) has discussed, many players lack the language to be able to critically discuss the games they play, or they do not realize that games merit the kind of deep analysis that one might give to a book, play, or film. This is a shame, because many players become intimately familiar with the games they play and develop deep, meaningful relationships with games as texts. Fernández-Vara pushes for more teaching of textual analysis as applied to games in order to help students learn to “use their knowledge to discuss games with the depth and nuance they deserve” (p. 2). Indeed, countless scholars have called for more critical media literacy to be taught in the classroom, starting at a young age, recognizing how vital it is for a healthy democracy (for example, see Yildiz & Keengwe, 2015). However, demonstrations of critical media analysis are needed outside the classroom as well:

[A] sophisticated discourse on games does exist. Unfortunately, only a very small group of scholars, and an even smaller number of practitioners and critics, are familiar with it these days. At present, mainstream videogame journalism and industry dominate the creation of analytical models in relation to popular culture—it is more likely that videogame fans will read a videogame review or a development blog than any of the papers given at the DiGRA conference. (Fernández-Vara, 2014, p. 3)

Similarly, few game reviews include considerations of identity politics and how representational practices relate to social justice. Those that do inevitably draw backlash in the comments, and that backlash is particularly vitriolic if the reviewer is a woman. May Gushie (2021) has written on her experience of harassment as a woman game journalist, pointing out that “the issue is that I and many other female journalists are receiving these types of messages based on our gender or the very topic of advocacy.”

This kind of backlash has undoubtedly led to fewer journalists, critics, and scholars willing to risk writing public pieces about representation in games, which unfortunately means that the trolls are winning—they are succeeding at silencing critical feminist voices. Gushie argues for more protections and security measures built into social media platforms to protect journalists, yet without a change in the very culture surrounding games these measures will only ever treat the symptoms, not the disease itself. As

Emma Vossen (2018) has noted, “while better blocking or banning mechanisms on Twitter or in online games might be a Band-Aid solution, games and games culture need to address their own prejudices in order to become truly diverse and safe for girls and women” (pp. 46–47).

Games culture must become safe not just for women players but also women scholars and critics, as they are particularly likely to receive backlash for their public-facing scholarship and criticism (Citron, 2014; Hess, 2017; Veletsianos et al., 2018), especially when it involves a discussion of social justice or identity politics. Yet, as George Veletsianos et al. (2018) point out, knowledge mobilization is increasingly becoming an expectation for academics, while the experiences and coping strategies of those who face harassment and abuse online are still understudied:

As scholars are encouraged to be online as part of their jobs or want to be online for a variety of scholarly purposes such as knowledge mobilization, the harassment that women scholars face online becomes an important issue to study. Online harassment seeks to silence and marginalize women scholars’ voices and adversely impacts not just women’s personal and professional lives but also the public’s access to scholarship. (p. 4690)

In other words, we need studies of online harassment in order to develop more effective coping strategies and tactics for careful knowledge dissemination. As Gushie argues, platforms have to be held accountable for the behavior of their users and develop more protections and security measures. And, perhaps most importantly, as Vossen observes, things won’t really change until the culture surrounding games changes. While there are many reasons to avoid the vulnerability of public-facing, social justice-oriented game scholarship, especially for women scholars, I feel that work is vital to any kind of intervention into games culture and the games industry.

Close reading as a game changer?

Feminist writing on games is still considered niche, and it’s too easy for gamers of the dominant hegemonic demographic to attack, belittle, and dismiss it as women (or other marginalized groups) complaining, whining, or “playing the victim.” Although it’s easy for me to say, writing an academic piece that few members of the gamer public will likely ever read, despite the risks outlined above I strongly advocate for more public facing game criticism and more blending of subjective qualitative analysis with social justice-oriented theory. I also call for more collaboration between scholars approaching the same issues and applying the same lenses but with different methodologies, in order to use every tool available to us to work for positive change. We should not shy away from close reading even though it does often open us up to accusations of being paranoid, projecting our insecurities, or seeing what “isn’t there,” but we should find ways to do it effectively, safely, and using language and venues that bring it out of the academy and into the public realm. Close reading centralizes the scholar’s perspective, subjectivity, and experience, which is particularly important when the scholar occupies a less privileged subject position and can speak to systemic oppression as it is intertwined with mediated content. The closeness, intimacy, and vulnerability of close reading is what makes it compelling as a method.

On the other hand, choosing not to publish this kind of work or make these kinds of videos means choosing safety. Feminist critics and journalists put themselves at risk every

time they publish and we as academics often remain relatively safe publishing in academic journals. But this only furthers the existing divide between academia and the rest of the world, and so those who feel safe enough to do so should start making their academic game studies research accessible and available to the public as much as possible. This means not just publishing in open access journals, as those are not often read by the public, but writing articles for game journalism websites and blogs, making YouTube video essays, and communicating our ideas on social media. This will inevitably require an end to the preference hiring and tenure committees have for publications in so-called “high-tier” (i.e. paywalled) journals and perhaps even a full dismantling of journal paywalls. I’m tempted to say something like “we can only dream” but I fully believe it’s not only doable but absolutely necessary for the survival of academia, of feminist research, and of game studies. Doing this work is indeed a huge risk, and yet, as Shira Chess (2020) has argued, games are ripe for change. This is the moment for more feminist, social justice-oriented game criticism, more demonstrations of careful and nuanced close analysis. While there might always be backlash by those who are resistant to change, we must continue to show how and why representation in games matters. This is one of the key ways that feminist game scholars can work to address and dismantle the prejudices within games culture.

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