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Gaming out online: Black lesbian identity development and community building in Xbox Live

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ABSTRACT

As gaming culture continues to marginalize women and people of color, other gamers are also highlighting the inequalities they face within digital gaming communities. While heterosexism and homophobia are commonplace within gaming culture, little is known about the actual experiences of “gaymers” and even less about “gaymers” of color. As such, this article seeks to explore lesbians of color and their experiences “gayming” out and online. Exploring identity development, community building, and connectivity via social networking, the women within this study articulate what it means to be lesbian online and how this impacts their physical and digital experiences. The private spaces within gaming culture that many marginalized groups inhabit are the few spaces that value the articulation of marginalized interests and viewpoints. Ethnographic observations reveal how supportive communities can improve resilience by mitigating the effects of stereotyping, microaggressions, and other discriminatory practices in online gaming.

KEYWORDS

Video games; lesbian; identity; race; gender; multiplayer gaming

Introduction

As Jenny Sundén (2009) emphatically discussed, “Queer gamers—or “gaymers”—are a vibrant part of game culture” but are mostly invisible in game studies (1). Additionally, queer-identifying gamers are also marginalized in gaming communities (Gray, 2012). The purpose of this study is to center their experiences by paying particular attention to identity formation and community building by Black women who identify as lesbian in Xbox Live. Drawing from an ethnographic approach, this essay documents women’s use of a digital gaming community to navigate their racialized, gendered, and sexual identities and create a community that sustains them. As Adrienne Shaw (2009) posits, the homogenous nature of the video game industry has led to the lack of LGBT content in video games and this culture extends to interactions online as well. For instance, the creation of the

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LGBTQ friendly community within *World of Warcraft* (WoW) and subsequent suspension from the community (for violating terms of service) reveal the contentions and hypocritical stances taken by stakeholders in gaming communities. As one WoW user stated, “we can say fag [in gaming spaces] we just can’t be one,” and this illustrates the lack of attention devoted to actual heterosexism in the space. As Anderson (2006) outlines, “cases such as these make it clear that ‘virtual’ worlds are only virtual in a limited sense; real-world issues can and do impinge on the fantasy landscape of games...” (as cited in Pulos, 2013). Further, queer “folk (have) always been told to hide themselves and who they really are in the real world (Ibid). The same holds true in many gaming spaces as well.

Culture, community, and anonymity in Xbox Live

Recalling the old adage, “on the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog,” this idea soon ballooned into a contextual framework used in examining Internet culture. The idea being that when one traverses into digital spaces, our physical bodies, inclusive of our varying identities, have no bearing on our experiences and outcomes because no one knows who we are (Gray, 2016). Early Internet scholars theorized that virtual environments would provide an outlet to exist beyond the parameters of the body (Daniels, 2013). This liberatory potential of the Internet had extreme lure; however, this lure existed in a realm of assumed Whiteness as the Internet was traditionally a domain of the privileged. Cyberfeminists even urged that the Internet had liberating qualities that could free us from the confines of our gendered bodies (Bromseth & Sunden, 2011). The premise, however, has been criticized as both utopic and irrelevant to marginalized circumstances in new technologies (Ibid). We cannot just forego our bodies in virtual spaces, because much of our real world selves are emitted into these spaces. The discussion must move beyond the confines of the digital and be reexamined for its potential to mobilize the oppressed in both digital and physical spaces.

Marginalized users are unable to be completely anonymous online. The nature of Xbox Live does not allow for full anonymity and/or identity deception; there is a virtual manifestation of physical reality. Marginalized bodies are not able to hide from the digital public their race, gender, sexuality, or other aspects of their identities. Specifically, lesbian gamers of color are subject to daily oppression including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and nativism. Due to the inequalities they experience, they have segregated themselves from the larger gaming community and game from the digital margins (Gray, 2011).

While trolls, political dissidents, and those contributing to toxic digital environments dominate the conversation on why anonymous digital spaces are concerning, the power that these spaces afford to marginalized individuals should not be discounted. Anonymity can be considered people taking “on various personas, even a different gender, and to express facets of themselves without fear of disapproval and sanctions by those in their real-life social circle” (Bargh, McKenna, &

Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 34). The architecture and structure of online gaming environments inherently allow identity experiments. Many who identify as queer see extreme value in this, especially those who have not revealed their sexual identities in physical spaces. Griffiths and colleagues (2003) point out that massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) allow “a range of identities (and genders) to be explored by playing a created character. While it may be similar to “identity experiment,” the “identity experiment” in online chat rooms is in a text format, not an image form, whereas the character that a player creates in MMORPG exists in a defined visual art form (e.g., an avatar). Researchers describe this phenomenon as shifting experience from the third person to the first person (Livingston, 2002). The first-person experience increases the intensity and immersive nature of online gaming. But what is the in-game reality in the game? This research examines beyond what we play and explores who we are and who we can be in online gaming. Before examining the impact of the digital on our identities, a brief examination of Black lesbian identity must occur.

Racializing and gendering lesbian identity

While similar to the White lesbian community in many ways, there are some key distinctions in the Black lesbian community. For instance, socioeconomic status and outward physical appearance are significant to distinguishing lesbians (Crawley, 2001) and are even more pronounced when marginalized identities are amplified. Among socioeconomically disadvantaged lesbians, the concept of butch-femme is culturally important. Wilson (2009) conducted a cultural analysis of Black lesbian sexual culture, including the sexual beliefs and attitudes of Black lesbians. She found that participants used the word “stud” to reference lesbians whose dress and appearance were traditionally masculine and who were expected to take on a traditional U.S. male role in a relationship, and the word “femme” to label lesbian women whose dress and appearance were traditionally feminine and who were expected to adopt a traditional female role within relationships. She also found variations on femme and stud, such as “hard studs” (lesbians extremely masculine in dress and manner and who refused sexual acts), and “pillow princesses” (ultra femmes who preferred receiving sexual pleasure and didn’t reciprocate sexual pleasure for their partner).

Mignon Moore’s (2006) study extended this dichotomy to be more inclusive of the diversity within the Black lesbian community. In her study, she identified a modification of the older butch/femme identities into three distinct categories or three physical presentations of gender—femme, gender-blender, and transgressive (Moore, 2006). While presentation of self typically refers to physical presentation of gender, gender presentation, and gender display (Lorber, 1994), Moore suggests that gender display may also be represented through hairstyle, body language, mannerisms, and other self-expressions (Moore, 2006).

Relating to lesbian gender structures, Wilson (2009) indicates that some lesbians reject the lesbian gender label but still opt to structure relationships based on this lesbian gender identity. This may mean that although some women may not identify with a lesbian gender, they still perform some of these dynamics within their community and relationships. When lesbians interact with each other in social environments, they may assign lesbian gender identities to others but not see how the identity fits for them. This changes lesbian gender identity from one that is internalized to an ascribed identity (Wilson, 2009). In addition, lesbians from a more privileged socioeconomic background or those who have obtained a high level of education may consider self-identifying as their lesbian gender as taboo (Ibid). On the other hand, the finding that less educated and working-class lesbians were reported to use lesbian gender labels still makes lesbian gender identity particularly relevant for young Black lesbian women of marginal economic status (Wilson, 2009). While some may view these labels as oppressive, recreating heteronormative and classed hierarchies, they should be viewed through the lens of self-definition, which is at the core of Black feminist thought, and the digital presents particular opportunities to redefine or coopt these definitions.

Critical race feminists stress the importance of allowing all women to define themselves (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2009). Creating and controlling definitions of oneself are imperative for empowerment. The oppressed have a unique standpoint in that they, as individuals, share particular social locations, such as being female, a person of color, LGBTQ, poor, or living in a society that privileges ability. Further, these individuals share their meaningful experiences with one another, generating knowledge about the social world from their points of view (Harnois, 2010). Despite this knowledge generation, oppressed populations lack the control needed to reframe and reconceptualize their existence within hegemonic structures. However, a particular advantage presents itself with the diffusion of information technologies, providing advantages to women and people of color. One of the advantages is the ability to create and control digital spaces largely unregulated or occupied by privileged bodies. These spaces have the potential to foster the development of a group standpoint, negating the impact of dominant ideology. As Gray (2015) explores, Black cyberfeminism, specifically, concerns itself with three major themes: (1) social structural oppression of technology and virtual spaces; (2) intersecting oppressions experienced in virtual spaces; and (3) the distinctness of the virtual feminist community. Women of color have co-opted traditional digital spaces for their own means to communicate and empower their communities. So, by employing the cultural tradition of *sygnifyin'*, marginalized bodies can express themselves with others without fear of retaliation or being othered within the spaces (Florini, 2014). By bridging cyberfeminism and Black feminist thought, Black cyberfeminism is able to interrogate how women have understood their oppressed status, recognized the gendered and raced nature of the digital divide, and made sense of their realities and experiences (Gray,

2015). As such, the current research will explore identity development among Black lesbians in Xbox Live, paying particular attention to the ways the space influences their identities and aids in community building because of their marginal status rooted from their intersectional standpoint and expressed in digital gaming.

Research design

To critically examine identity formation and community building by queer-identifying Black and Latinx women in Xbox Live, this study employed both ethnography and narrative analysis. This ethnography will also explore the fragmented sites that queer-identifying women inhabit. While Xbox Live is the central location, there must be an acknowledgement of the physical spaces that the women also inhabit: the home, the workplace, campus, restaurants, recreational spaces, etc., considering that many women indicate they take Xbox with them (via an application they access on mobile devices and tablets). While these sites may appear fragmented, they are made coherent by examining the women's physical and digital experiences. Lesbians experience community in multiple spaces, just as other populations do. Just because a marginalized population is the center of the inquiry, it is imperative to situate their particular intersectional histories through expressed power relations to each other and within structural contexts.

Participants

This is a journey with a map created and controlled by the narrators (research participants). As an active listener, I am doing more than just consuming a story; rather, I am engaged in documenting their lived realities as experienced through a digital medium. I relied on snowball sampling to generate a total of 15 women of

Table 1. Narrator demographics and gender identity information.

Narrator	Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity	Age	Self-Identified Gender Presentation	Self-Identified Personality Type	Gender Presentation Preference
Nene	Black/AA	24	No Answer	No Answer	Fem
Kina	Black/AA	21	Dom	Passive	Fem
Jan	Black/Middle Eastern	23	Fem	In between–Both	Dom
Laysha	Black/AA	22	Fem	Aggressive	Stud/Dom
Tara	Black/AA	22	Fem	Aggressive	Stud/Dom
Carmen	Black/Latina	22	Fem	In between–Both	Stud/Dom
Tracy	Black/AA	23	Fem	In between–Both	Stud
Nyla	Black/Latina	21	Dom	Passive	Fem
Carla	Black/Latina	20	“Gender Blender”*	Passive	Fem
Michelle	Black/AA	20	Dom	Aggressive	Fem
Ahliyah	Black/AA	19	“Gender Blender”	In between–Both	Fem
Kyra	Black/AA	20	Fem	Aggressive	Stud/Dom
Paula	Black/AA	23	Stud	Passive	Fem
Shayla	Black/AA	23	Fem	Passive	Stud/Dom
Bianca	Black/AA	22	“Gender Blender”	In between–Both	Fem

*Gender Blender was a term utilized by the women who identified as such.

color who were queer identifying. Table 1 lists the narrators who agreed to share their stories and experiences within Xbox Live. Included on this table are factors that were significant to the narrators, nothing that I intended to capture to confirm or deny labels revealed in the literature. Their racialized and sexualized identities mattered with all of them identifying racially as Black. In addition to a discussion on their race and gender presentations, personality type was included. Gender presentations preference was also significant, and this confirms what the literature suggested.

Procedures

The primary method of collecting data was observation; semi-structured questions were secondary and only used to propel conversations forward to have a narrator expand on a topic. I did not want to disrupt their community within Xbox Live and only formally communicated at the beginning or end of their gaming sessions. While a structured interview protocol did not exist, each interview followed this general format: (1) describe your identity; (2) describe your gendered identity; (3) describe how you explore identity online; (4) how has Xbox influenced the development of your identity; (5) what kinds of issues do you experience on- and offline in relation to your lesbian identity? IRB approval was granted prior to conducting any interviews.

Analysis/discussion

The data from this study reveal three key organizing themes describing the experiences of 15 Black women who also identified as lesbian in Xbox Live. The three organizing themes include: (1) the contentious role of anonymity; (2) isolation and the utility of digital connectivity; and (3) transgressive play.

The contentious role of anonymity

It has been said that anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority (Whitt, 1995). While there are negative impacts on the role of anonymity in digital spaces, the current context will examine positive impacts that anonymity affords. The statement summarizes the experiences of some of the queer-identifying women of color in Xbox Live. What was quickly understood was that anonymity had tremendous power for the cis-identifying women in the study because of the power of a normalized identity. For the women who adopted transgressive identities, this same privilege was not extended to them. As one narrator put it, “*ain’t no closets in the ghetto and none online—at least not for me.*” In the excerpt that follows, I will illustrate the dynamic that exists within this Xbox Live community on the affordances of anonymity and power inherent in being able to be you.

I see it like an actual place. With actual people. And we are really connected. They are more than just gamers on a list. They are the people who know me the best... I can't say these

kinds of things to anybody in my family. And really not to any of my friends. They have no idea I like girls. I get to hide that. (Tracy, Fem, 22)

Being online let's me be me. And we do more than just play games. Sometimes we just sit in a chat and talk about everything. So I'll have the headset on and tell them what happened all day. I get my papers done, I get on social media, all while on Xbox. There is no other place in my life where I can do that. (Tara, Fem, 22)

I can't be who I want to be on Facebook or Twitter. I know too many of those people in real life. And like my real friends aren't gamers so this is a space I have all to myself... to really be... like me. Ya know? I know that might sound crazy but my mom read one of my chats one time because I forgot to log out of facebook. Luckily it wasn't too crazy but I don't really have a private life on FB. And twitter is just too much. Ain't nothing really like Xbox... that's just me. (Kyra, Fem, 20)

These women reveal the things made possible by being connected with others online. The structure of this gaming community provides virtual distance from one's physical identity. As social identity theories reveal, individuals navigate their identities based on context, place, and space (Hogg et al., 2004). So being able to express physically hidden identities with others who share similar experiences is powerful for them. It also underscores the importance of this Xbox Live in helping them build their community. And while one single quote does not uncover the complete process, it must be understood that Xbox Live has inadvertently given them this tool of empowerment. In the few words expressed by Kyra (Fem, 20), other socially mediated spaces don't have the level of anonymity that Xbox Live does. As she pointed out, she logs onto Facebook in a variety of settings: school, home, tablets, and other mobile devices. She articulates that potentially everyone who is near her could have access to her personal Facebook Messenger chat because she forgets to log off. But because almost no one except her expresses interests in gaming, they aren't concerned about what she is doing in that space. As she would often remark, "they see it as a game, and that's it."

What is even more significant is that gaming consoles are physical objects that reside in one's home, in close proximity to the self. Social networking sites exist within devices that are mobile. While Xbox Live is equipped with instant messenger and has the possibility of linking social media accounts, the participants express that they keep these mediated worlds mostly separate. Tara (Fem, 22) seemed to be the only individual who would use Xbox Live to access these other social media spaces. What is important to note about socially mediated and digital spaces is that one's decision to participate is largely influenced by social ties within the space (Garton, Haythornwaite, & Wellman, 1999) and the level of intimacy depending on these connected relationships. Although different studies conceptualize intimacy differently, level of emotional support within the space was mentioned most frequently (Ibid). While the narrators within this study expressed close familial relationships on social media, that level of emotional support for their sexual identities was not present to establish those intimate connections.

While hiding may be an achievable feat for many of the fem-identifying women in the study, those who adopt transgressive identities are not able to shield their identities and are often assumed to be lesbian because of their outward appearance. They don't express similar feelings with the affordances of anonymity online.

Man ain't no closets in the ghetto and none online—at least not for me. I mean that literally too. Ain't no dam closets. [Laughing] On some real shit, you can't hide. I can't hide. All deez team nosey's. Everybody know everybody business. But aside from that, you can't be different in the black community. And I look like a dude. Everybody assumed I was gay and so maybe I was like ok yeah I am. I'm not saying that made me gay but I didn't spend time trying to hide it. Because I couldn't. (Paula, Stud, 23)

Anonymity dumb. I get why some people need it but I can't hide so I get mad that all deez dam fems dat get to. If they fuck wit us den dey should be out wit us. I know it aint that easy tho. Just ven'in [venting]. (Kina, Dom, 21)

You know what anonymity does, gives ammo to people who hate me. The shit I read everyday going to hell, praying the gay away, all dat shit. It gets to you. Because aint nobody saying it to my face. [someone in the background says: "dem prechas tell you every Sunday."] You right. And I expect it from dey ass. But it's hard comin from these so called woke niggas who only care about Black men. And dey really be coming down on gay dudes. I'on [don't] like it. (Nene, 24)

These powerful excerpts run counter to the feelings expressed by the fem-identifying women in the study. Those with transgressive identities express a lifetime of being "outed" because of their outward appearance and not being able to conform to the cis-female constructed identity. And as Paula (Stud, 23) powerfully expressed, "ain't no closets in the ghetto." This statement, rooted at the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality, reflects the interlocking nature of being poor, Black, woman, and queer identifying. Paula also expresses the singular identity of having to be just Black. An idea that can trace its roots back to the Civil Rights era, to the lynching era, to the plantation—where women had to vow loyalty to their racialized identities, and not their genders or sexualities. The singular narrative of Blackness restricts identity development in physical settings and also online, as is currently being expressed. As many of those who adopt transgressive identities reveal, they are constantly bombarded with the singular narrative at the expense of who they are. They have dealt with it all their lives, so the anonymity afforded while being online doesn't provide much protection for their physical lives, which is of utmost importance to them.

Isolation, exclusion, and digital connectivity in Xbox Live

Finally, there was a space... that allowed me to be me. I could be black and it was okay. I could be a woman and it was ok. I could be a dyke and it was really ok. Now if I could find a way to make that happen in real life, I'd be one happy bitch. (Kina, Dom, 21)

As Audre Lorde (2007) describes, Black lesbians are constantly encouraged to pick some aspect of who they are and present it as the "meaningful whole, eclipsing and

denying other parts of the self” (in Lorde & Clarke, 2007, p. 120). For Lorde and other Black lesbians, one’s identity as a Black lesbian is the meaningful whole and the earlier quote reveals that. As Kina (Dom, 21) expresses, being inside this online community in Xbox Live gives her this ability. Carla (20) explains it more as a process that occurs, as opposed to a singular moment when she could express her intersecting identity.

Now I’ve always been Borinqueña. Please believe! So I knew I was a woman. I knew I was Puerto Rican. I’ve only recently been thinking about what did it also mean to be Negrita. I don’t look Black. But I am Black. Many people don’t get that. And when I realized I was attracted to women I was like aww shit. I’m struggling enough. Being black while brown. Disrupting colonized minds. I’m too woke for all this. (Carla, 20, Gender Blender)

Carla’s journey to consciousness and realization of who she is had such an impression on her physical and digital reality. She recognized the intersecting nature of her identities and how these identities are fluid to fit the dominant cultural script. She spent considerable time articulating what expressing the spectrum of her identity meant in a space that often privileges singular forms of Blackness that many people aspire to attain. Even more profound was what this meant online with other Black-identifying gamers:

Now most Black folks [in physical settings] don’t even get my struggle or even try to understand it. But its not their fault. We conditioned for division. But I found this group [of women in Xbox Live] where all that didn’t matter because we all have our own individual struggles... and we try to understand each other... does that make sense? And that’s enough for me. I can be who I am. They want to know more about it. (Carla, 20, Gender Blender)

Carla went on to explain that Xbox Live is the only community where she can be herself. She suggested that some of the Black and Brown groups on Facebook are so singular and become toxic if you deviate from the racial or lingual identity, so the private chat of Xbox Live gives her the ability to explore her identities safely with others who value each aspect. Previous research has revealed this singular narrative in exploring discrimination by other racial minorities (Gray, 2011). This research also highlights the tendency for men of color to rank oppression and root their marginal status as more significant than what women of color encounter (Ibid). So identifying spaces where this intra-marginalization doesn’t occur is a chore. The women within this study have found each other and support each other in the space.

The women in the study expressed pride in the community they had created and recognize that if it didn’t exist, they would not have remained in this particular gaming community.

I’m too old for gaming for real. We all are. But we stay not cuz it gives us something to do... please believe we got plenty of shit to do... but because we can’t find no where else like this. I don’t have this on campus. I know Carmen at a big school and has way more gay folks on campus. But I’m in BFE. I don’t have nobody but them. (Paula, Stud, 23)

Paula's perspective is one that centers an additional dimension of identity in discussing the impact that regional differences had on lesbian identity development. In the seminal text written by Mary L. Gray (2009) on queer visibility among youth in the rural United States, she highlights the tendency to center urban experiences. In the earlier statement, Paula too de-centers metronormativity in highlighting the isolation that is common to being queer in rural America. Further, the added dimension of being Black and woman in the rural United States poses particular concerns for Paula, who is a student-athlete and hails from an urban center. She didn't realize the "privilege of the city" until not having it.

If I knew it would be like this I probably never would have come to this shit. But I'm here. Getting an education. But it's hard cuz I can't really be gay. Coaches don't fuck with that shit. So we don't really have any where to be who we are. Imma do my time and get the fuck out... so yeah Xbox gives me an outlet. (Paula, Stud, 23)

Digital scholars have recently made the link between users' physical and online selves, recognizing that these spaces are more linked than distinct, separate spheres. But for Paula and others adopting transgressive identities in the study, their digital world is completely separate from their physical realities, and many would prefer that their physical spaces mirror their liberatory experiences online. Because of the frustrations experienced in both physical and digital settings, many users respond in Xbox Live in ways that are cathartic to these inequitable practices.

Transgressive play

It is important to acknowledge that many of the women within Xbox Live use gaming as not just a means to connect with others, but they use their play to resist "the patriarchy." This type of resistance play could be referred to as "transgressive play." As Aarseth (2014) explains, transgressive play "is a symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a... way... to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself" (p. 132). This framing of resistance is essential to explaining the gaming experiences of women of color in gaming communities. Kina (Dom, 21) explains her process when experiencing harassment online.

Kina: I think I might be the only one that still like gaming in the main lobbies. Everybody else just be playing with people from they friends list. But I miss how it was. Now I don't have time for the foolishness. So when they start coming talking about black bitch this—nigger that, I light they asses up.

Me: What you be doing?

Kina: When they start all the disrespectful stuff I don't say like all the negative stuff back to them. I keep it focused on the game. Me calling them names won't hurt. I mean it doesn't hurt me and I want them to know I'm not bothered by it. So you know we can beat anybody so that's what I do.

Me: So your strategy is to embarrass them? In the game?

Kina: And make sure they know good and well they lost to a girl. I talks to em the whole time. I send messages. They usually block me when nothing they do is working. So they can't beat me. They can't hurt me. They so fragile. Fragile as fuck (Laughing).

There is much to unpack from this small interaction I had with Kina. First, it's rooted in similar practices that other women in gaming have done. I am recalling the Militant Misses, who would excel in game play to thwart the oppression they experienced online (Gray, 2012). And while this coping strategy may be limited to some of the women in this space, the levels of empowerment experienced are huge and must not be discounted. As Amanda Cote (2017) posits, women are an active audience and implement a variety of in-game strategies to prevent harassment; some of those tactics range from leaving gaming altogether, hiding their gendered identity, avoiding strangers, and even centering a high ranking or prestigious skill level. The latter is the approach taken by Kina.

The women in this study express their transgressive play in other ways as well. Although sexuality isn't a prominent theme in their daily interactions online, they make it visible in other ways. And this leads to further isolation. Kina (Dom, 21) and Jan (Fem, 23) explain an interaction where they were assumed to be men and the process of unfolding the layers of their identity went quickly from praise to ridicule and harassment. In the following excerpt, they explain interacting with Black and Latino males in the popular game *Gears of War*.

Jan: Well it started because we was running shit. We had the most kills for like 4 rounds straight. And then they said let's party up.

Kina: So when we came into the room and they heard us talking of course, they start all that shit. They don't like go to the kitchen stuff and making sandwiches and shit like white dudes be doing. But I think it's worse. What deez niggas put us through is way worse.

Jan: Yeah they want us to suck they dick and shit.

Kina: Right. So we kilt all dat noise and was like "yo yall wanna game or what." We coulda went ahead and said we lesbians but we know where that leads to.

Jan: Exactly. It's like the less we tell them the better the gaming [experience].

Kina: But when did they find out. I don't think we told them right out? Or did we?

Jan: Nah, Nene joined with chat with her man-sounding ass.

Kina: Oh shit that's right. OMG they started riding her so bad. She sound straight like a nigga. So she can't even hide who she is you know?

Jan: And I told them to leave my baby alone.

Me: Oh you're partnered with Nene, or you were just speaking... like... like figuratively?

Jan: Yeah that's my girlfriend like in real life.

Kina: Not like me an' Laysha. She [assuming Nene or Jan?] get to see the pussy everyday!

(Laughing. And a side conversation begins before they return to this conversation).

Jan: But then dudes were like oh these dykes this, dyke that and I was like oh hell naw. And we all going back and forth. And I was like what you mad we get more pussy than you?

Kina: Man! Why you even say that. They lost it and kicked us out the dam room. It's like once they manhood was challenged, it was over. And for white dudes, it's like dey'on like for dey gaming to be challenged. It's weird. But niggas like bitches that can play.

Jan: We just gotta be fuckable too I guess.

For Jan and Kina to recall this narrative, I am immediately reminded about the interlocking nature of oppression and what that means in communities of color. As was discussed earlier, Black and Latinx feminists have long realized the unspoken rule to vow loyalty to the race over gendered and sexualities identities. The ways that the men of color lashed out at Kina, Nene, and Jan was rooted in a lack of recognition of sexual identity. For these Black lesbians, sexuality comes into play in harsh ways that make them hypervisible and hypervulnerable to the impacts of racialized, heteronormative, heterosexist, patriarchy. The ideal player is one that is White, male, and straight. And Black and Latinx men exert their masculine privilege in hostile and toxic ways. So many queer-identifying women are unable to locate affinity spaces with men of color, so this amplifies the discriminatory practices. As Jenny Sundén (2009) rightfully states,

...even if queer players have a vivid presence in online communities, to “come out” in the game, or simply express an inclusive attitude in terms of sexual orientations, has proved to be enough for exclusion.... Thus, another potentially transgressive, disobedient, unsettling figure is the nonstraight player—male, female or in-between—who makes explicit how sexuality comes to matter in online game cultures. (p. 3)

While the tendency to just root gamers in the singular identity of “gamer,” gaming culture must become aware of the precarious nature of residing in a marginalized body and traversing toxic climates that are dominating many gaming spaces. Queer identity is one that exists naturally as rebellion, as disobedience, as deviance. Those who adopt queer identities disrupt the boundaries of normalcy that are often implied in most social settings. As Kina and Jan explained, they were hoping to be able to pass in the hostile heteronormative spaces but were quickly outted because Nene is unable to hide aspects of her identity. The linguistic profiling that she experiences was swift and severe and she isolates herself from the larger gaming community.

Conclusion

The private spaces within gaming culture that many marginalized groups inhabit are the few spaces that value the articulation of marginalized interests and viewpoints. In the small community that these lesbians of color have established, they build social cohesion, and establish alternative and equally valuable interpretations of what it means to be Black, Woman, Lesbian, Poor, and geographically isolated in many contexts. Often, these women are forced to fit limited narratives and skewed labels to root their identities in the Black community and in the White lesbian community.

Just as the real, or “somatic, bar has been crucial in identity formation among LGBTQ communities,” so too is the modern virtual social space inhabited by those who identify as LGBTQ” (Campbell, 2004, p. 53). And women of color are often

excluded from this identity formation. The process leading to the understanding of one's identity also occurs across time, space, and within different contexts. What it means to be a lesbian online may or may not be the same in physical settings. As Kyra reveals, being a Black lesbian online changes based on the affordances of anonymity within the space. But anonymity won't reduce the history of the history of oppression, marginalization, and exclusion that LGBT individuals have faced because of their sexual orientation. Richard and Hoadley's (2015) work is pivotal in assessing how supportive communities can improve resilience by mitigating the effects of stereotyping, microaggressions, and other discriminatory practices in online gaming. Their findings demonstrate that a female-supportive gaming community can foster equitable gaming identification and self-concept. While Xbox Live did not intentionally create private party chats to foster supportive gaming, this feature has inadvertently created connectivity that facilitates identity development among Black lesbians.

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