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Feminist Worldbuilding: Intersectional Methodologies in Feminist SF Criticism and Feminist Game Studies

Abstract

The emerging field of feminist game studies is one that requires more extensive discussion regarding its methodological approaches in order to consider the methods that can be used to leverage the field's position in game studies, the gaming industry, and the gaming community. As such, this paper will consider the ways feminist game studies can implement intersectional feminist methodologies and methodological pluralism in order to disrupt hegemonic structures in the gaming community. To do so, this paper will interrogate the conversation between feminist science fiction criticism and feminist game studies because such an interrogation will allow for a fuller understanding of the methodological strategies implemented in feminist SF criticism and the ways these strategies can be extended to the field of feminist game studies. This paper will explore the methodological worldbuilding of feminist SF criticism and will argue that this worldbuilding can be used by feminist game studies to disrupt the epistemological borders drawn around the gaming community. Through such disruptive intersectional methods, feminist game studies works to unsettle hierarchical and hegemonic structures of power in the gaming community and imagine alternate intersectional models that allow for worlds and futurities based on inclusion, fluidity, movement, and change.

Key Words: worldbuilding, intersectionality, feminist science fiction, feminist SF criticism, feminist game studies

Introduction: Imagining Feminist Alternatives through Intersectional Methods

While the field of game studies has worked to establish itself as an independent field, one autonomously bounded off from other fields of study^{1 2}, the conversation occurring between game studies and other fields (such as the field of literary studies) requires additional consideration, especially regarding the implications such blurred, interdisciplinary conversations have for methodological approaches to the analysis of games. The field of *feminist* game studies, specifically, encourages intersectional methodologies in the study of games and looks toward feminist studies at large³ in order to consider how and why such approaches might be utilized in feminist game studies scholarship^{4 5}.

Nina Lykke argues that feminist studies requires “theoretical diversity and methodological pluralism” and encourages readers to think of feminist studies as “a field of knowledge production characterized by diversity, fluctuation, fluidity and change”.⁶ This paper will work to enact such pluralistic knowledge production through the interrogation of intersectional feminist praxis in game studies and literary spaces in order to explore the intersections of criticism, production, and community. I will specifically interrogate the interdisciplinary conversation between feminist game studies criticism and feminist SF criticism in order to consider the ways both fields imagine alternatives to patriarchal structures. I will also examine the ways both fields’ methodologies work to legitimize their epistemological claims in academic spaces that view such criticism as peripheral. In doing so, I will assess the implications this conversation has for the implementation of intersectional feminist methodologies across academic spaces; as such, my goal is to assess the ways in which intersectional feminist methodologies can help to dismantle boundaries, claim space⁷, and make room for criticism and production that centralizes the importance of inclusivity and intersectional positionalities and methodologies. Ultimately, I argue that these methodological efforts to imagine alternative configurations is a form of feminist worldbuilding because these efforts allow feminist work to disrupt and dismantle patriarchal structures through the (re)imagining of feminist alternatives—that is,

¹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, (Cambridge: MIT) (2007).

² Gonzalo Frasca, <http://www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.htm>, date accessed 17 Jun. 2016.

³ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge) (1991).

⁴ Mia Consalvo, “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars.” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 1:1 (2012).

⁵ Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P) (2014).

⁶ Nina Lykke, *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*, (New York: Routledge) (2010), p. 3.

⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books) (1987).

through the building of feminist worlds. As such, I contend that feminist game studies can look to feminist SF criticism's use of intersectional feminist worldbuilding in order to consider the ways in which feminist game studies can also implement such worldbuilding as a methodological tool.

Fluid Frameworks, Multiple Lenses: Defining Intersectional Feminist Methodologies

This analysis of intersectional methodologies and feminist worldbuilding is motivated by the manner in which feminist research works to establish interpretive frameworks. Nina Lykke argues that these interpretive frameworks result in a multiplicity of feminist methods, and she contends that the discussion of feminist methodologies is needed because “discussions of methodologies and methods have not occupied the same spectacular space in the limelight of feminist theorizing as have debates on epistemologies”.⁸ And while conversations regarding epistemologies, methodologies, and methods often intersect, Lykke explains that it is important to note the differences between these terms:

A common distinction between *epistemology* and *methodology* is that the former deals with *criteria* for what constitutes scientific and scholarly knowledge, while the latter focuses on *rules, principles* and *procedures* for the production of knowledge. Distinct from methodology, *methods* relates to the *concrete approaches* chosen to carry out a particular piece of research. Since the process and the product of research—and issues concerning choice of approaches, methodological underpinnings of this choice and criteria for how a desirable outcome of the research can be reached—are so closely related, these issues are often discussed together.⁹

Thus, while these issues are often discussed together, methods and methodologies, as Lykke says, are often not the focal points of these conversations; and so, they require additional feminist theorizing so that we can better interrogate the approaches and procedures we can engage in for the production of knowledge. Lykke also argues that feminist epistemologies, methodologies, and methods all require *pluralism*—because “it is more or less self-evident that this entails a great deal of diversity when methods are to be chosen”¹⁰ in any feminist work. As such, feminist methods and methodologies—feminist approaches and procedures—rely on and result in pluralistic approaches to knowledge production, and *intersectional* feminist methodologies, specifically, result in such epistemological pluralism.

⁸ Lykke, pp. 145.

⁹ Lykke, pp. 144.

¹⁰ Lykke, pp. 160.

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It is important to stress, here, that intersectional feminist theorizing and praxis arise from the work of women of colour, and Kimberle Crenshaw first introduced the term *intersectionality* in 1989. Crenshaw argues that the “intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism”¹¹, and thus feminist and antiracist work needs to interrogate racism, sexism, and patriarchy because the “praxis of both should be centred on the life chances and life situations of people who should be cared about without regard to the source of their difficulties”.¹² Crenshaw also argues that praxis that centres on the life situations of people works off the “view that the social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; it can instead be the source of social empowerment and reconstruction”.¹³ Thus, intersectional feminism “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed”¹⁴, and intersectional feminist theorizing “argues that racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing...and that a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be a political response to both”.¹⁵ And, as Crenshaw contends, “Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics.”¹⁶

Methodologies that emerge from this intersectional theorizing, as Lykke contends, require feminist innovation that “emerges out of untraditional, non-authoritarian...approaches to existing theories, thinking technologies and tools”.¹⁷ Thus, intersectional feminist methodologies “take an anti-canonical stance” and emphasize methodological diversity and pluralism in order to “break up stereotypes and ideas about sameness”.¹⁸ Something that can break up these homogenizing ideas is the method of writing “from a non-innocent somewhere” during which “the author has an obligation to make herself accountable for her location in it”.¹⁹ This methodological approach is inspired by Donna Haraway’s epistemology of situated knowledges and partial perspectives, in which Haraway argues for a “doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects”.²⁰ These situated knowledges, Haraway contends, allow “us to become answerable for what we learn how

¹¹ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989:1 (1989), p. 140.

¹² Crenshaw, pp. 166.

¹³ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identify Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color”, *Stanford Law Review*, 43:6 (1991), p. 1242.

¹⁴ Crenshaw, pp. 1245.

¹⁵ Crenshaw, pp. 1283.

¹⁶ Crenshaw, pp. 1299.

¹⁷ Lykke, pp. 161.

¹⁸ Lykke, pp. 3.

¹⁹ Lykke, pp. 4.

²⁰ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *Feminist Studies*, 14:3 (1988), p. 581.

to see”.²¹ In short, intersectional feminist methodologies require this understanding of situated knowledge because methodological pluralism implements “politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people’s lives”.²² Intersectional methodologies, then, incorporate and invoke “the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity”.²³

In short, my goal in unpacking intersectional methodologies by tracing the methodological conversation between feminist SF criticism and feminist game studies—goals that are themselves rooted in intersectional feminist praxis—is to guide readers through the implementation of a multiplicity of methods, processes, and perspectives and through the interrogation of the ways intersectionality’s methodological pluralism can allow the emerging field of feminist game studies to construct itself as a space based on inclusivity, solidarity, and the building of coalitions that acknowledge and respect different positionalities. This construction of inclusive space means that intersectional feminist methodologies are a mode of *worldbuilding*—a way to build feminist coalitions that imagine alternative modes of existence—because the pluralism and inclusivity of intersectional feminist methodologies allows feminist writers to build anti-canonical, anti-racist, patriarchy-disrupting worlds that instead construct alternative spaces that centre intersectional feminist coalitions and futurities.

Patterning, Anchoring, Launching: Building Worlds in Feminist SF Criticism

When interrogating intersectional feminist methodologies and unpacking their potential for feminist worldbuilding, it seems only fitting to discuss research that examines feminist science fiction as an example of such work. As Haraway notes, the genre of science fiction has been “such a rich writing practice in recent feminist theory. I like to see feminist theory as a reinvented coyote discourse obligated to its sources in many heterogeneous accounts of the world”.²⁴ For Haraway, then, feminist SF is a particular exemplar of this “reinvented coyote discourse” because of its ability to implement “heterogeneous accounts of the world” and to use these accounts as a form of feminist worldbuilding. Alexis Lothian, in working to define and frame feminist science fiction’s futurism—its reinvented coyote discourse—argues that the genre “is a world of

²¹ Haraway, pp. 582.

²² Haraway, pp. 589.

²³ Haraway, pp. 589.

²⁴ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, pp. 594.

imagination, but it is also just around the corner, always and almost already here”.²⁵ Debra Benita Shaw contends that feminist science fiction has historically worked to challenge and disrupt epistemological claims in both scientific and literary knowledge production because such fiction has “a socially or politically critical purpose”²⁶, a purpose that Marleen Barr says allows feminist SF to present “blueprints for social structures that allow women’s words to counter patriarchal myths”.²⁷

Patricia Melzer similarly discusses the “socially and politically critical purpose” of feminist science fiction, and she discusses the feminist value of this “particular narrative mode”.²⁸ Melzer explains, “Two textual aspects that define science fiction are the structures and/or narrative devices that constitute its mode, on one hand, and themes and approaches on the other.”²⁹ Some of the narrative devices that Melzer identifies are “the element of estrangement, or the confrontation of normative systems/perspectives, and the implication of new sets of norms that result in the factual reporting of fiction”.³⁰ Melzer explains that these narrative elements, then, “shape the reading process”³¹ and “create ‘blueprints’ of social theories. Only within genres of the fantastic is it possible to imagine completely new social orders and ways of being that differ radically from human existence as we know it”.³²

Melzer explains that the reason science fiction is a genre ripe for the feminist theorizing and imagining of “social and political change” is because of the “combination of strangeness and familiarity that make up the particularities of the genre. This tension between the ‘known’ and the ‘unknown’ is at the heart of science fiction. It creates a reading process based on estrangement, which places familiar issues into strange territory...This estrangement also creates spaces of abstraction for theorizing”.³³ Yet, this space for theorizing does not solely rely on estrangement, but, rather, it also requires *identification* because, in science fiction, “we grow to know the protagonists and their world intimately...As in other types of fiction, the ‘realness’ of science fiction narratives enables individuals (and groups) to relate to and recognize the debates as relevant to their own lives”.³⁴

Thus, the science fictional strategies of estrangement and identification are the *methods* that allow the genre of *feminist* science fiction, in particular, to be utilized as a crucial tool for examining issues of gendered and race-based power and oppression, and

²⁵ Alexis Lothian, “Introduction: Science Fiction and the Feminist Present”, *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 3 (2013).

²⁶ Debra Benita Shaw, *Women, Science and Fiction: The Frankenstein Inheritance*, (New York: Palgrave) (2000), p. 2.

²⁷ Marleen Barr, *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*, (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P) (1993), p. 7.

²⁸ Patricia Melzer, *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*, (Austin: U of Texas P) (2006), p. 1.

²⁹ Melzer, pp. 1.

³⁰ Melzer, pp. 1.

³¹ Melzer, pp. 2.

³² Melzer, pp. 2.

³³ Melzer, pp. 3.

³⁴ Melzer, pp. 3.

Melzer argues that an understanding of feminist SF’s thematic concerns, structural and methodological strategies, and goals of resistance reveals that “[d]iscussing science fiction’s relationship to feminist thought recognizes popular culture’s role in creating meaning through representation, and it acknowledges the spaces of agency located within the process of consuming and producing cultural texts”.³⁵ Thus, Melzer contends that reading and researching feminist SF in this way and interrogating its efforts to enact social and political change “does not diminish the pleasure aspect of consuming (and producing) cultural texts; instead, it understands imagination, narrative, and desire as part of feminist theorizing”.³⁶

Raffaella Baccolini argues that, as far as the popular-cultural feminist theorizing in “science fiction is concerned, the intersection of gender and genre has generated new, subversive literary forms”.³⁷ And one of the subversive contributions of feminist SF writers has been the questioning and disruption of “masculinist discourses of traditional science fiction...Themes such as the representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality, and language and its relation to identity, have all been tackled, explored, and reappropriated by these writers”.³⁸ Such thematic disruption and resistance is also mirrored by feminist SF’s disruption of genre conventions:

The attack, in recent years, against universalist assumptions, fixity, and singularity, and pure, neutral, and objective knowledge in favor of the recognition of differences, multiplicity, and complexity, partial and situated knowledges, as well as hybridity and fluidity has contributed, among other things, to the deconstruction of genre purity...It is the very notion of an *impure* science fiction genre, with permeable borders that allow contamination from other genres, that represents resistance to hegemonic ideology and renovates the resisting nature of science fiction and makes the new science fiction genre also *multi-oppositional*.³⁹

In short, these are some of the ways that feminist SF builds worlds—that is, this worldbuilding works to construct a “new science fiction genre” that is fluid, “impure”, permeable, and hybrid, and this impure genre builds these new worlds in order to oppose patriarchal, hegemonic power structures within science fiction.

Melzer describes this feminist worldbuilding in science fiction as the creation of “systems of representation that create the freedom to voice assumptions otherwise restricted by a realist narrative frame, and the geographic displacement of identity formations”.⁴⁰ To be sure, feminist science fiction often makes use of such systems of

³⁵ Melzer, pp. 34.

³⁶ Melzer, pp. 34.

³⁷ Raffaella Baccolini, “Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler”, in *Future Females, the Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*, ed. Marleen S. Barr, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield) (2000), p. 15.

³⁸ Baccolini, pp. 16.

³⁹ Baccolini, pp. 18.

⁴⁰ Melzer, pp. 1.

representation—such *worlds*—in order to imagine possibilities for transformation. Feminist science fiction specifically conceives of such transformations through a lens that seeks to imagine a feminist future while, at the same time, recognizing the obstacles and challenges in the path toward such a future. In other words, many works of feminist science fiction engage in worldbuilding in order to conceive of different ways of experiencing gender; such worldbuilding critiques intersections of race and gender and the manner in which the oppression that occurs at such intersections might be transgressed and dismantled.

Just as feminist SF seeks to dismantle hegemonic knowledge production in science fiction, so too does feminist SF *criticism* seek to disrupt epistemic hierarchies, especially since the field functions in anti-canonical ways. Such efforts are emblematic of the fact that one of the things that feminist literary scholarship, more broadly, consistently interrogates is the idea of the literary canon—that is, what comes to count as legitimized knowledge in literary studies and who comes to count as legitimate researchers of such knowledge. The feminist interrogation of canon formation typically works to problematize the manner in which canonical hierarchies often come to be rendered on lines based on issues like race, gender, sexuality, and ability. But more than that, feminist literary scholarship works to disrupt the epistemological claims and implications of the canon—it works to destabilize the normative privileging of who gets to be a knower and what gets to be known in the academic field of literary studies. The field of feminist science fiction criticism exemplifies such goals, because, as Marleen Barr notes, it is a field that, when it first emerged, had to reconcile with the need to legitimize its epistemological claims in a space in which such claims were often deemed illegitimate as a result of it not only exploring women’s writing but also doing so within the popular-cultural genre of science fiction; indeed, Barr, in seeking to explain why she “chose to be a feminist critic who focuses on feminist science fiction” asks, “Why would I, a person who cares about professional success, embrace a twice marginalized field, a double whammy in relation to career advancement?”⁴¹

It would seem that those who, like Barr, embark on feminist SF scholarship do so not only to unsettle the marginalization of the field but also because this “twice marginalized field” is a space that allows for the imagining of other potentialities and futurities. Melzer argues that science fiction is a valuable genre for feminist interrogation because, even though it “has the reputation of being a male-dominated genre, it has always included women writers, and as a narrative style it is open to feminist appropriation”.⁴² But more than this, feminist science fiction and feminist *criticism* and “*readings* of science fiction have challenged existing gender relations and have explored theoretical and political debates of the time”.⁴³ Melzer argues that such challenges work to reveal that

⁴¹ Barr, pp. 2.

⁴² Melzer, pp. 7.

⁴³ Melzer, pp. 9.

“[w]omen’s increased involvement in science fiction has proven to be crucial both for the development of the subgenre of feminist science fiction and for feminist theorizing *outside* the science fiction community”.⁴⁴ Thus, Melzer believes that the interrogation of “science fiction’s relationship to feminist thought recognizes popular culture’s role in creating meaning through representation” and “does not diminish the pleasure aspect of consuming (and producing) cultural texts; instead, it understands imagination, narrative, and desire as part of feminist theorizing”.⁴⁵ Baccolini, too, discusses the role of popular culture and explains, “Traditionally, science fiction belongs to the category of popular literature, or paraliterature. Its position, in regard to so-called high literature, is one of marginality (at best) or inferiority (at worst). Several critics, however, rescue paraliterature from its associations with inferiority and have pointed to its subversive potential”.⁴⁶ The subversive potential of feminist SF and of the “twice-marginalized field” of feminist SF criticism is what makes the world of feminist SF ripe for feminist theorizing.

Joan Haran and Katie King also discuss the feminist theorizing that occurs in science fictional spaces, and they believe that the feminisms that occur during our science fictional times allow for collaborative, collective feminist projects that work toward interventions for the present in order to improve “the condition of our continuing”; that is, science fiction feminism is one that brings us together because “SF is multiply...[it is] variously contested and in coalition”.⁴⁷ As Haran and King contend, this multiplicitous SF means feminist science fiction allows us to consider such things in more productive ways than feminist theory alone can due to the many ways SF asks us to confront ourselves by generating “simultaneous selves, rework processes for play and for practicing hope, and arouse and resituate what counts as ‘us’ and ‘them.’”⁴⁸ This generating of multiple selves—and this reworking of processes and hopeful practices—is what constitutes the methodological worldbuilding of feminist SF criticism.

This worldbuilding is something that informs Donna Haraway’s scholarly practices, for it mirrors the ways she thinks of her own scholarship; indeed, Haraway argues, “My multispecies story telling is inflected through SF in all the fibres of the string figures that I try to pattern and to relay.”⁴⁹ Thus, for Haraway, scholarship mirrors and is indebted to the structure and patterns—the fibres and string figures—of the forms under study. And for Haraway, since SF is a polyglot, polymorphic form, so too is her writing and research of it. Since SF is about worlding, about building worlds, so too is

⁴⁴ Melzer, pp. 9.

⁴⁵ Melzer, pp. 34.

⁴⁶ Baccolini, pp. 15.

⁴⁷ Joan Haran and Katie King, “Science Fiction Feminisms, Feminist Science Fictions & Feminist Sustainability”, *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 3 (2013).

⁴⁸ Haran and King.

⁴⁹ Donna Haraway, “SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far”, *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 3 (2013).

her feminist scholarship—because the question of how one might be “response-able is the consequential question in SF worlding. String figure games are practices of scholarship, relaying, thinking with, becoming with in material-semiotic makings. Like SF, cat’s cradle is a game of relaying patterns...Scholarship is like that too; it is passing on in twists and skeins that require passion and action, holding still and moving, anchoring and launching.”⁵⁰ Haraway’s conception of such patternings in scholarship, influenced by her embeddedness and interest in science fiction and feminist thought, reveals the ways feminist worldbuilding does not solely occur in fictional settings but, rather, can be implemented within feminist scholarship as well. In other words, feminist scholarship also manifests such methodological patternings, for academic worldbuilding and feminist methodologies make use of twists and skeins, knots, and webs, worlding and transmediality, which requires a similarly patterned methodological approach.

Seeking Material Change: Building Worlds and Disrupting Rule Structures in Feminist Game Studies

The disruptive methodologies conceptualized by feminist SF criticism have implications for the position of feminist game studies criticism, too. Joan Haran and Katie King discuss the ways feminist science fiction intersects with the world of video games, for they interrogate the idea of the screen as the space of confrontation in transmedia storytelling and explain that gaming “has become an icon, as well as a material practice and apparatus of learning and of risky uncertainties, with economic, technological, and metric significance for seeking sustainabilities of many sorts today”.⁵¹ As such, games—as material practices, as apparatuses of risk, as metrics for sustainabilities—converse with science fiction because “[g]ames and media play upon our neurological and cognitive ‘screens’ with commercial and hobby practices that SF cares about and with”.⁵² These cognitive screens, these practices that occur within both games and SF, are perhaps the point of linkage at which the two intersect—an important intersection for feminist game studies to explore—for these screens are the location through which we engage with video games and science fiction and the screens at which we must orient our feminist practices in order to interrogate and confront the worlds that these screens convey. Thus, I argue that the disruptive methodological worldbuilding of feminist SF criticism can similarly be utilized by feminist game studies in order to make use of

⁵⁰ Haraway.

⁵¹ Haran and King.

⁵² Haran and King.

intersectional methodologies to dismantle hegemonic thought in the field of game studies.

Something that opens up and complicates the ways feminist game studies scholars might critique video games is by understanding games as Alexander Galloway does—that is, to conceive of video games as actions, and he also argues that we are now located within “an interesting upheaval in the area of mass culture” that is the result of the recent emergence of a new medium “whose foundation is not in looking and reading but in the instigation of material change through action”.⁵³ Thus, if video games are actions, then feminist critiques of games are also actions. And if, as Galloway contends, such action is oriented toward “material change”, then such an orientation is also the goal of feminist game studies—because this action, this orientation, is what encompasses the worldbuilding that facilitates the goals and methodological frameworks for *feminist* game studies, which seeks to enact change in the gaming community through active methodological disruption. Feminist game studies is thus methodologically disruptive in the ways it troubles boundaries and manipulates the rule structures of the dominant social order.

The concept of play, too, has methodological significance for feminist game studies. In *Play Matters*, Miguel Sicart argues, “Through play we experience the world, we construct it and we destroy it, and we explore who we are and what we can say.”⁵⁴ Significantly, Sicart notes that while all “contexts of play have rules of some type”⁵⁵, play can actually be a method for manipulating and challenging these rule systems: “A key ingredient of playing is thinking, manipulating, changing, and adapting rules. Rules, servant to the context, evolve while we play to address the necessities of particular play situations”.⁵⁶ Thus, play’s ability to manipulate rules means that play can “disruptively reveal our conventions, assumptions, biases, and dislikes. In disrupting the normal state of affairs by being playful, we can go beyond fun when we appropriate a context with the intention of playing with and within it. And in that move, we reveal the inner workings of the context that we inhabit”.⁵⁷ Thus, the intersectional methodologies of feminist game studies make use of this concept of play in that feminist game studies, as a discipline, engages in play’s efforts to unsettle the rule structures and normative systems in which we are situated. Feminist game studies—playfully, disruptively—reveals the inner workings of gaming culture and gaming narratives, thereby challenging the hegemonic conventions and patriarchal biases underpinning gaming spaces. In doing

⁵³ Alexander R Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota) (2006), p. 3.

⁵⁴ Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters*, (Cambridge: MIT) (2014), p. 5.

⁵⁵ Sicart, pp. 8.

⁵⁶ Sicart, pp. 8.

⁵⁷ Sicart, pp. 14.

so, the disruptive play of feminist game studies establishes (to return to Sicart's phrasing) a space for freedom.⁵⁸

But what does feminist game studies look like? And what is at stake in its space for freedom? Mia Consalvo argues that such a lens "can help to give us a firm foundation on which to stand in order to shed light on the persistence of particular issues, point to historical solutions for overcoming similar difficulties, and thereby push for a more welcoming kind of game culture for everyone".⁵⁹ Adrienne Shaw argues that a lens like feminist game studies offers "an approach to video games that can focus more attention on the lived experiences of those who engage with these games outside the dominant audience construction...and make an argument for representation that takes seriously those perspectives".⁶⁰ This is where the disruptive lens of feminist game studies matters, for it allows us to explore how other lives (the lives of those outside the dominant audience construction) are lived in the gaming community and how other futures can be made possible in game studies.

We can look to Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon's "Self-Saving Princess: Feminism and Post-Play Narrative Modding" as an example of how feminist game studies' disruptive methods can be put into practice, in their call for the emerging creative strategies "used by critics, academics, players, and others to critique, analyse, and change the video game community".⁶¹ Layne and Blackmon refer to these creative methods as *post-play narrative modding*, which reveals "some of the productive ways that feminists and those concerned about women in the gaming community can modify gaming narrative, protagonists, and the community in a positive way".⁶² Thus, post-play narrative modding is "a type of creative resistance" that works "by both disrupting what exists and insisting upon choice that acknowledges a diversity of viewpoints".⁶³ Thus, Layne and Blackmon provide an example of the ways feminist game studies can enact creative resistance. They provide us with a framework for a methodology of *disruption*.

This is the kind of work undertaken by feminist game studies, and intersectional feminist thought, then, helps construct the methodologies used in the field of feminist game studies. Indeed, Nina Huntemann says that feminist game studies specifically works to "confront toxic gamer culture" by "documenting, archiving, analysing, and responding to sexism, racism, ageism, and homophobia in games and game spaces".⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Sicart, pp. 18.

⁵⁹ Consalvo.

⁶⁰ Adrienne Shaw, "On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience", *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 2 (2013).

⁶¹ Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon, "Self-Saving Princess: Feminism and Post-Play Narrative Modding", *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 2 (2013).

⁶² Layne and Blackmon.

⁶³ Layne and Blackmon.

⁶⁴ Nina Huntemann, "Introduction: Feminist Discourses in Games/Game Studies", *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 2 (2013).

But she also addresses the challenges and resistance that scholars in feminist game studies face when engaging in this kind of disruptive work:

In a space where sexism and homophobia are performed and reproduced as if it is part of the digital code, feminist attention to video games and game culture is threatening. Those who wield gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and other forms of social power in order to intimidate, silence, and oppress others will fiercely reject a feminist lens focused on the cultural products that serve as platforms for that oppression. The mere suggestion that these cultural products are not the domains of white, heterosexual men unleashes a torrent of vicious border policing.⁶⁵

Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm importantly point out that this border-policing occurs not only in the larger culture of video games but in the ways games are studied as well. Indeed, the discipline of game studies itself privileges certain forms of knowledge production in the field, and while the “discipline itself has grown rapidly...for most of game studies’ history, conversations about identity have only ever happened on the margins”.⁶⁶ Thus, game studies has systemically marginalized analyses that consider identity, representation, and embodiment—in other words, the kind of analyses in which feminist game studies scholars, for example, often engage—because “representational analysis becomes the less rigorous, less medium-specific way to approach video games, compared to a focus on ‘hard-core’ elements”⁶⁷ like rule systems, coding, game mechanics, and software. But the disciplinary and epistemological privileging that occurs in game studies, Malkowski and Russworm argue, “misunderstand both the nature and importance of representation in the medium. It is both possible and essential to study representation productively in video games, even as this pursuit might initially seem poorly aligned with the ontology of video games (built as they are on processes and actions) or with disciplinary trends toward areas like code and platform studies”.⁶⁸

Thus, Malkowski and Russworm argue that the importance of this mode of analysis is due to the need to counter the ways representational analysis has been deemed peripheral in game studies “with the implicit justification that the discipline should focus instead on the richer objects of code and of game platforms as complex systems—not audio-visual surfaces. Yet... representation and identity are similarly complex systems that are always relevant to the ways in which games, codes, platforms—indeed, all technologies—are constructed”.⁶⁹ In short, Malkowski and Russworm display the need for intersectional feminist methodologies in the study of

⁶⁵ Huntemann.

⁶⁶ Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea Russworm, “Introduction: Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies Beyond the Politics of the Image”, *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP) (2017).

⁶⁷ Malkowski and Russworm.

⁶⁸ Malkowski and Russworm

⁶⁹ Malkowski and Russworm.

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games because such methods allow feminist game studies scholars to disrupt the epistemological privileging and hegemonic knowledge production that occur in game studies; Malkowski and Russworm display the need, then, for feminist game studies scholarship that centralizes representational analysis because “[r]epresentation in game studies must be viewed as a system that functions as akin to—rather than as a distraction from—the discipline’s more celebrated, hard-core objects of study”.⁷⁰

This, then, is where feminist game studies becomes helpful as a field that explores the complexity of intersecting systems. Feminist game studies can allow us to problematize video game culture, challenge its definitions of who gets to be a gamer and what gets to be a game, and disrupt game studies’ definitions of who gets to be a scholar and what gets to be studied. These methods and goals, too, parallel those implemented in feminist SF criticism—a field that has been similarly marginalized and delegitimized in literary spaces—for, like feminist SF criticism, feminist game studies makes use of active, playful, heterogeneous feminist worldbuilding to claim space in game studies. And if we think of feminist game studies as a field that works to dismantle and disrupt the power structures that exist within video game culture, game studies, and the gaming community, disrupting hegemonically constructed gaming epistemologies and positionalities seem like good places to start, which is something that Adrienne Shaw also argues in her assertion “that critical perspectives, such as feminist and queer theory, offer an approach to video games that can focus more attention on the lived experiences of those who engage with these games outside the dominant audience construction—indeed outside of identifying as gamers—and make an argument for representation that takes seriously those perspectives”.⁷¹ Kishonna Gray, like Shaw, calls for and works to enact analysis that takes seriously those perspectives, and she explains that by “examining video game content through the eyes of the marginalized, by highlighting the virtual gaming experiences of minorities, and by interrogating possible solutions to intersecting oppressions”, the analysis of representation, race, gender, and intersecting oppressions in gaming spaces is “a much needed addition to the theoretical examination of video games”.⁷² To be sure, such analysis is much needed in the field of game studies, and while many challenges to this kind of work still exist, feminist and critical race scholars like Shaw, Gray, and others are already providing inroads into centralizing such methodologies in game studies.

⁷⁰ Malkowski and Russworm.

⁷¹ Adrienne Shaw, “On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience”, *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 2 (2013).

⁷² Kishonna Gray, *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins*, (London: Routledge) (2014).

Conclusion

These, then, are the intersectional and interdisciplinary methodologies needed in feminist game studies—methods that are the extension of those already implemented in feminist SF criticism. Such methods will allow feminist game studies to enact disruption by problematizing the controlling images⁷³ within video game narratives and imagining new worlds and alternate possibilities for representation. Feminist game studies’ methods also work to establish intersectional coalitions based on feminist solidarity in order to dismantle and disrupt the epistemological borders drawn around who gets to be a knower and what gets to be known in the gaming community. Through such disruptive intersectional methods, feminist game studies work to unsettle hierarchical, sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist structures of power in the gaming community and imagine models that allow for worlds and futurities based on inclusion, fluidity, movement, and *change*. Such worldbuilding allows feminist game studies to create a space within the world of video games, the gaming industry, and the field of game studies. That is, feminist game studies is a space that imagines new worlds, new possibilities for representation, and new models of existence and futurity in the gaming community.

Thus, feminist research on games works to claim space not only in game studies, but also in video game culture and the gaming industry at large. It does so by being enacted, methodologically, in a multiplicity of ways—both intersectionally and interdisciplinarily—in order to seek change and in order to create “a safe environment for women”, for people of colour, for LGBTQI members of “the larger video gaming community”.⁷⁴ In short, feminist game studies, like feminist SF criticism, makes use of feminist worldbuilding as an intersectional methodology in order to transgress and dismantle the network of oppression that marginalized groups systemically face in gaming spaces, communities, and research. And because feminist game studies is an emerging field, its intersectional methods and praxis will continue to shift and grow—and will continue to learn from and incorporate approaches from other feminist spaces in order to do so—so that the field can better serve the marginalized communities feminist game studies seeks to centre.

⁷³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge) (2000).

⁷⁴ Layne and Blackmon.

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