Growing Pains: Feminisms and intergenerationality in Digital Games

Abstract

In response to a growing focus on inclusivity in digital games culture, both in mainstream journalism and academia, a range of collaborators have organized to enact change in this domain under the umbrella of ‘feminists in games’ (FIG). This article explores how moments of tension between women, groups, and communities self-identifying as FIG can be understood not solely through rigid conceptualizations of feminist ‘waves’ but instead also through generational and intersectional differences that can shape approaches related to equality, equity, and diversity within this movement. Drawing on qualitative case studies on two feminist game-making organizations in Canada, we argue that such an understanding of generational approaches to feminism and gender-based action provides a clarifying lens by which to better understand the differences and symmetries that comprise intersections of gender (both cis and trans) with race, age, class, education, and other subject-positions. We also indicate how these moments of intergenerational rupture can be linked to the broader corporate context in which FIG activism is situated, before indicating the radical potentialities for feminist praxis, a praxis which we argue is structured more by politics and intersectionality than generation.

Keywords: feminism in games, feminist action, intersectionality, intergenerationality, community
The Game Developers Conference (GDC) is a major US annual convention drawing together game design professionals and interested parties from the industry for activities including expositions, awards ceremonies, workshops, networking events, and talks. Since its inception in 1988, the event has attracted mainstream developers, independent designers, cultural critics, and academics interested in discussing the latest innovations in games. With the growth of the game industry, the focus of the conference has comprised developments in digital gaming as both entertainment media and as a powerful form for expression, including social critique, art, and educational purposes. In 2013, journalists noted an increase in critical discourse on the insistent gender-based exclusions within this realm and the power of independently-developed games for offering new avenues for diversity and innovation (Hamilton 2013; Alexander 2013). This marked a turning point in mainstream public discourse on gaming, providing an incitement to discourse on topics such as accessibility, inclusion, and gender-based discrimination.

Subsequent coverage of the GDC indicates the challenges that arise in recognizing as well as addressing the entrenched power imbalances that can hinder access and thus diversity in digital games (GDC 2014). Notably, equality in quantitative terms (such as including women on previously male-dominated panels) has tended to be the preferred mode of enacting change in what is now widely perceived to be has been constructed as a hypermasculinized domain of consumption and production in the global hegemony of play (Fron et. al. 2007). Most assuredly, increasing the representation of women as well as people of colour and others historically marginalized within this media
form is an important intervention. It is particularly significant given the still largely homogenous sphere of games production, where the number of female employees is estimated at 22% (IGDA 2014), with other surveys indicating even lower numbers of women in technical and creative roles (Prescott and Bogg 2011). Based on these troubling statistics, an array of organizations, loosely grouped as “Women in Games” (WIG) initiatives, have emerged to support women working in this industry. However, as game designer Mattie Brice (2015) noted after attending GDC 2015, simply placing more women in games production is not the panacea for the problems plaguing digital games culture. Characterizing such initiatives and gatherings as the “Lean In” feminism of games, Brice indicates the necessity of addressing intersectional privilege related to age, finances, and the ability to ignore the astounding campaign of hate (Consalvo 2013; Salter & Blodgett 2013) directed against women visibly working to shift the status quo of digital games at the GDC WIG event she attended:

I noticed a theme about who was present, or, who was spoken to during the presentations. Mostly, 40+ women were successful and in similar places as men [sic] counterparts and under 21 women and girls who now have money thrown at them to learn how to code and eventually join these matriarchs in the industry. Of course, not a mention of harassment, discrimination, or abuse was mentioned the entire event.

As this quote highlights, the mainstreaming of discourse and ‘action’ around gender-based diversity in digital games is not entirely successful when it comes to engaging with
the complexities of equity and social justice. While equality might perhaps be seen as a simple quantitative approach of balancing the numbers, equity in games would entail a more radical shift: one that considers the significant intersections of gender and other forms of exclusion including (but not limited to) age, race, class, and education. In other words, equality-based measures are premised on having the same numbers of individuals in the existing context of production and participation, while equity-based action would entail a fundamental change to the underlying structural and systemic norms that inhibit fairness. It is this focus on the broader and deeper cultural and social norms related to identity and how these result in inequitable, oppressive, and violent situations for women and other marginalized groups in games that has inspired an international organization as well as a larger research/activism agenda called Feminists in Games, or FIG (Jenson & de Castell 2013), involving projects, groups, and researchers in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Shifting the focus from often depoliticized and individualistic ‘WIG’ activities to a range of interventions addressing structural barriers to participation, prominent gender and games scholars Jenson and de Castell therefore describe FIG’s mission as “inventing equity” (79).

This paper examines the ways in which the activist work of cis- and trans- women game designers and community members conducted under the aegis of FIG involves new feminist the challenges faced in this new feminist agenda. The move from WIG to FIG is neither a clean break nor very long-standing, and thus issues related to clashing or contradictory visions of feminist action arise frequently. As Brice’s experience of GDC 2015 indicates, generationality and its intersections with race, class,
gender identity as well as corporate values constitute a pressing concern in organizing for inclusivity within digital games. In what follows, we explore the contours of this challenge through empirical research with female game designers and activists participating in an incubator for first-time game developers, and within two Canadian community organizations founded on the principles of feminist action in games. Dames Making Games (DMG) Organization A is a Toronto-based not-for-profit organization that has been running since 2012, offering a range of locally-based programs and events to support diverse participation in games. Pixelles Organization B operates out of Montreal and was formed following some of the principles and practices of DMG Organization A for engaging more women in games-making. Both organizations are run by a small group of volunteer directors and coordinators, but have in their existence supported dozens of women in designing, writing, playing, critiquing, and playing games. Organization A and B have been supported in various ways by the larger research network that coined “Feminists in Games” but our analysis and observations here are limited to the FIG activism of these organizations. Based on our research and participation within these two groups, we have identified three points of ruptures related to the interplay of diverse generations of feminist thought and action, based on membership and belonging, feminist politics and culture, and sanctioned professionalization activities in games. Through these cases and points of rupture, we highlight some of the ways in which intersectionality and a reliance on corporate partnerships often introduces tensions in intergenerational digital games activism and scholarship, as well as alongside potentially productive avenues for more radical and sweeping change in this growing and significant creative industry.
Beyond Waves: Gender, Feminism, and Digital Games Research

Gender and digital games research is an active area characterized by theoretical and methodological pitfalls, namely upholding conceptions of inherent sex-based differences related to play interests and abilities, a problem which has shaped the very hypotheses, research questions, and approaches of many studies (Jenson and de Castell 2010). In response to these kinds of essentializing research projects, some scholars have shifted the focus from sex to gender, considering the social and cultural factors shaping gendered engagements with digital games. Such research studies explore how girls understand and construct gameplay as gendered, and negotiate expectations related to normative femininity and masculinity in relationship to their play (Walkerdine, 2006; Carr, 2005; Beavis & Charles 2007; Jenson and de Castell 2011; Fisher and Jenson, 2015). Attuned to the importance of the context of digital gaming, this work demonstrates how digital gaming becomes a technology of the gendered self (Royse et. al. 2007), rather than as an expression of ‘natural’ inclinations or preferences for particular forms of leisure.

It is tempting, based on these iterative and reflexive shifts in the research field, to primarily frame gender and games scholarship along the lines of the ‘waves’ of feminism or of gender research more broadly (Richard 2013). We resist this categorization, however, in favour of understanding developments in digital games and gender scholarship as also being politicized responses to the changing culture of the media form, as noted above. For example, in tandem with the growing discourse around identity within game culture itself, a burgeoning body of research has begun to document...
and analyze the sexism and misogyny faced by women in public spaces of gaming, including online games (Gray 2012; Braithwaite 2014; Fox and Tang 2014, Cote 2015) and professional e-gaming (Taylor, Jenson and de Castell 2009, Witkowski 2011). As such work indicates, research in this area operates dialogically with the culture and communities of digital games play and production. In this article we contribute to this analysis by considering the generational shifts occurring within games and gender, from ‘women’ to ‘feminism’ in games as well as from grassroots community work linked to the academic project of Feminist of Games to the growth of fully-fledged and increasingly established institutions doing this work independently. We focus in particular on the ways in which these shifts are not as cohesive as the discourse of ‘waves’ might suggest, but also characterized by internal generational conflicts related to intersectionality, commercialization, and professionalization.

This feminist agenda for games research merging scholarship with activism and community engagement is set in a hostile and toxic gaming public for women and other marginalized groups. Such praxis-oriented work considers a range of feminist actions in this domain, including in online discussions, community initiatives, and educational spheres (Allen 2014; Cross 2014; Fisher & Harvey 2013; Flynn-Jones 2014; Harvey & Fisher 2013, 2015). In many cases, such as including the research we draw on for this paper, this active research entails not only a feminist theoretical lens but also a feminist approach to engaging and collaborating with participating communities. This paper draws on our experiences within the activist/academic networks of FIG, including our feminist participatory action research with an incubator and two community groups.
in Canada. We conducted a series of interviews with approximately 20 alumni and members of these initiatives in 2013 to get a sense of how they understood and practiced feminism in games and in their communities. Our intention was to use longitudinal research to provide a sustained analysis of the ways in which gender-based action unfolds within and between self-identifying feminists to address inequalities in digital games.

What we found was a set of contradictions related to intergenerational feminisms, corporate values, and intersectionality. In what follows, we showcase these tensions through a consideration of three themes of intergenerational rupture that highlight the challenges and opportunities afforded by the relationships between multiple communities-of-practice. These points of rupture centre on discourses of belonging, politics and culture, and sanctioned activity in FIG spaces.

Before we review these points of rupture, however, it is vital to note that in this analysis we understand approaches to FIG community building not as unique responses from individual feminist activists, but as a conversation between feminist critics. FIG activists may fundamentally seek to subvert the hegemony of play and the patriarchy more broadly, but in this process they also face moments of disagreement with each other based on their generational approach to activism and change. As such, feminist engagement in this project is understood as contributing to the “constitution of critical community” (Zerilli, 2008, p. 107) rather than failing to reach some idealized point of universal consensus. It is important also to clarify that when we are discussing FIG here, we are referring to the diffusion of this agenda for structural critique and transformation beyond the research collective in which it was first defined, through the community
organizations under review in particular. Moreover, both authors have been (and continue to be) collaborators in the development of these formations, and thus are also implicated in the critiques this article makes. Indeed, this is part of what we refer to as ‘calling in’ later in the article—a moment for reflecting on the challenges and opportunities for expanding academic engagements with community and public groups. In what follows, we explore the relationship between generations, activism, discourse, and hegemony, not to characterize the FIG agenda as ‘troubled’ but rather to indicate its growing pains, which are healthy and necessary to the iterative process of ‘inventing equity’.

**Rupture 1: Membership, Belonging, and Boundaries**

Creating spaces for the participation of those typically excluded in digital games play, production, and culture has been shown to reverse stereotypical patterns of engagement in this domain (Jenson and de Castell 2011). Women-only incubators, jams, and groups carve out this space for those interested in game design who find other channels to game development alienating. DMG and PixellesOrganization A and B do so by offering a range of activities, including not only jams and incubators but also workshops, socials, and mentorship programs. However, in order to stretch limited resources as non-profit groups, both organizations place limitations to prioritize the participation of women in the community. While all participants in the study fit these criteria for inclusion, many reflected on how membership as a concept entailed exclusion despite the mandate of the organization. In the case of one of the groups, a participant noted that criteria for participation functioned in a manner that resembled a clubhouse, as the use of the term...
‘membership’ resembles exclusive entry as with a gym or country club. This was particularly poignant given that within the community groups differing classes of member status entail varying degrees of financial commitment and access.

Membership demarcates who belongs in the space and, implicitly, that there are rules and responsibilities entailed in being in the space. In aiming to foster a safe, inclusive space for women then, these FIG organizations face the challenge of being interpreted as a private rather than public space and for aligning inclusion with tiers of membership. This for the participants was not problematic in the focus on women, but more troubling in terms of the lack of recognition in membership structures of class, race, sexuality, and gender identity. Participants cited the ways in which the fee structure, even with a no fee membership option, presented challenges to the dignity of poor game-makers: “it’s really embarrassing to tell organizers that you don’t have $10 for a workshop”. They also noted that the distinction for men and women re-engrained a gender binary. Both groups have been responsive to this critique and are careful to use the terms “gender queer”, “cis”, “trans”, and “female-identified” to recognize non-binary gender identity. Race, however, presents an ongoing challenge, with organizers speaking to the difficulty of selecting participants of incubators and jams based on ethnicity, as this is not so easily captured as with a box to check for gender. One participant noted an initial reluctance to visit one of the community spaces as they were concerned about being a token person of color in a space “for white people”. Openness to reflecting on race and its intersections with gender in digital games entails more than saying “all are welcome” but cannot be recognized in the same way as gender in defining equality based on numbers. One
interviewee participated in the organizing of workshop on the topic of race and ethnicity that was well-received (and often cited) by community members, but this type of event has so far not been repeated, indicating the difficulty of consistently attending to race, as well as class and sexuality, in the FIG agenda.

As this indicates, membership categories are political tools for ordering bodies, a process that entails inclusion and exclusion, defining apparently divisible parts from a vague whole. Where divisions are not seen as possible, as in the intersections discussed, this approach towards inclusivity can fail to address marginalized participants and thus implicitly make statements about belonging. The citizenship hailed within these community groups then signals a particular generation of feminist, a club member complicit with the delimited vision of inclusion within the organization. As we review in the next section, this can resulted at times in tensions related to differing visions of feminist politics and culture.

Rupture 2: Feminist Discourse, Politics, and Culture

The use of the term ‘feminist’ to characterize a game-focused organization makes a strong statement in a culture that is still often antifeminist, misogynistic, and violent in response to women’s visible and vocal participation (Consalvo, 2012; Fisher & Jenson, 2015). However, within and between FIG organizations there are myriad definitions of feminism and what it entails. Rarely are these differences discussed or defined explicitly in official group documents or spaces. Yet the tensions between them become apparent in disagreements related to the culture and politics of the community space, particularly in
terms of appropriate and contested discourse. Interview participants discussed this tension through the concepts of the ‘hugbox’ and ‘call-out culture’, notions that as we discuss below highlight how contact between the values and norms of differing generations of feminism and how their contact can create friction.

As participants indicated, the formation of feminist community groups focused on issues of inclusivity is important and timely. A great deal of journalistic and academic coverage of these organizations have taken a decidedly celebratory tone in profiling their histories, activities, and visions of the future. At the same time, however, participants were reflexive of the challenges faced within the organizations, and this kind of critical perspective was seen as desirable in the face of the temptation to become a ‘hugbox’. The ‘hugbox’ concept was used by interviewees to refer to a group of like-minded individuals who do not allow for critique of their practices in order to create a safe space for their mission. The hugbox was framed as seductive in its celebratory tone regarding the organization and its activities, but something whilst also being a mode that was ultimately dangerous in terms of its long-term growth.

The oppositional type of discourse to the hugbox was the practice of ‘calling out’ statements or activities that are unintentionally harmful in order to foster self-reflection on privilege and power. Call-outs are typically public, either in person or in online contexts, and thus make the harmful act and the lesson being imparted visible to others. Participants disagreed on the value of the call out, and many also indicated the challenges characterizing this approach. For example, one very visible activist described
her experiences as a tightrope act of balancing a developing career in independent game design while holding people accountable in a way that would not hinder her work or her platform. As she said, “speaking up and out against things is difficult because you can get ostracized further or labeled as crazy or gossiped about”.

But participants also discussed the value of calling people out as a necessary feminist practice, especially within these FIG spaces, as it can be educational to the community about by revealing the privileged perspectives of FIG activists and highlighting some of the challenges of intergenerational contact. Calling someone out to ‘check their privilege’ is not only about spreading a larger feminist message but also about fostering intersectional feminist practice between women, including across generations of feminists in games. For example, in one incubator an experienced social justice activist called a game-maker out on the implications of her proposed game title. Discussion of the creator’s power and privilege provided the space for the designer to explain her position and to ultimately come to the conclusion that the proposed title was not the best choice. The exchange occurred in front of an entire group of first-time game-makers, making the topic of class and race privilege a visible one rather than the concern of one individual. It is important to note that this was a case, as with many of the interactions we discuss, where both actors were approximately the same age (most participants were in their mid-20s to early-30s), indicating that generational difference cannot be easily mapped onto distinct time-based feminist ‘waves’ and indeed other intersectional and affective ties may be more important.
While this case was a positive example of how a call-out can be generative of reflection, others spoke negatively about their experiences of being called out, and of resulting feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, and guilt. One participant vehemently disagreed with the notion of call-outs, characterizing them as aggressive and ultimately unrealistic in a world that is unkind to women; as they put it, noting that it is “tiring to have to battle the world you live in.” Some saw call-outs as derailing of the intentions of the speaker. In sum, there are strong affective responses to visible indications of privilege, and one issue is that an absence of community protocols to deal with what is uncomfortable and how to productively discuss intent, reaction, power, and privilege, despite the inclusion of safe/safer space policies. We can also understand this as a challenge of balancing critique and support in what is an overall hostile, resoundingly anti-feminist climate.

On the other hand, some participants were dismissive of the hugbox ethos and highlighted the need to “call it what it is”, whether this refers to toxic people or abusive practices. The consequences of this outspoken approach were could include dismissals ranging from designating the discourse as “drama” or the speaker as a “wacko.”

Organizers and designers with more extensive experience in social justice communities often tend to frame call-out culture and affective responses such as anger as essential to feminist activism, where disruptive tensions are fundamental and productive (Mouffe, 1999). Even still, these participants indicated that any assessments of (un)civil speech...
need to be considered in a nuanced manner, as in call-outs “you win in debate but lose in community building.”

We argue that these disagreements related to civility and speech are part of the “politics of respectability” which promote particular modes of being that marginalized groups such as people of colour are expected to perform in order to be recognized and sanctioned by dominant groups (Higginbotham, 1993). The affirmation of non-aggressive, non-discomfiting speech and the implicit disavowal of the need to have frank and public discussions about intersectional forms of privilege can be seen as an expression of a particular instantiation of imperialist, middle-class solidarity feminism. This generation, mode of feminist praxis tends to privilege the approaches, voices, and perspectives of those who have historically dominated feminist discourse by devaluing conversations about race, class, sexuality, and colonialism, among other examples.

Negative responses to the hugbox shows that this generation form of feminism still privileges a relatively narrow group of activists: cis-gender, heterosexual, Western, financially stable, able-bodied, and educated women. Those who speak out against this ethos articulate the values and challenges of generations of black feminism, anti-colonial, and queer feminism, where they clash with the White feminism that has come to heavily inform FIG organizing (Deliovsky, 2010).

Rupture 3: Professionalism Paternalism and Sanctioned Activities

In the prior two examples, tensions arose in the community organizations related to sentiments of belonging and identity as well as disagreements related to feminist...
discourse and action. We also observed that belonging and discourse were key
organizations became a key point where specific questions related to the culture and
technologies of digital games factored into community tension. While these FIG groups
focused on women making games, none of them positioned themselves as providing
professional development. Incubators are often for first time developers and the
workshops were described as “softcore”, providing introductory information on tools or
focusing on non-technical dimensions of games such as art. As such, FIG is not seen as a
vehicle to get women into the games industry quickly, as achieving a shift in cultural
attitudes is a long-term process.

Instead, creating a social network and learning how to make games for creative
expression and personal empowerment is how most of our participants’ interpreted the
purposes of FIG organizations. Indeed, the majority of those interviewed did not
professionally identify themselves exclusively as “game developers”, but as animators,
makers, craft-artists, illustrators, web and graphic designers, and programmers.
Digital games were but another tool in participants’ toolboxes. For them, community-
based education initiatives were an attractive space to learn game design and
development skills, especially for those who could not afford to invest time and money
into formal games education.

Moreover, it shows that for our participants the FIG space is primarily about providing a
space that supports critical dialogue rather than training or a “path to a career in games.”
If the only way to change games is through “shifting culture through conversations”, as
one participant noted, then the FIG space should be one generative of critical conversation, either through traditional channels such as discussions at social events, town halls, and talks or through game-making itself.

While as a community-based feminist organization, it is not necessary to be aligned with industry, many tenets and practices with these groups indicated to the participants that professionalism is an imperative, and to varying degrees, an expected outcome of participation. With professionalization, there are particular modes of gauging success, including amounts and duration of funding, business outputs and deliverables, and matching industry standards. Implicit standards of professionalism led to tensions amongst participants. Several noted feeling “duped” and subsequently “iced” out as the consequences for not following unspoken business protocols and practices. One participant, for example, was reprimanded for giving an “unprofessional” presentation on her latest game project and encouraged to change her behaviour through an invitation to participate in a “public speaking for professionals” workshop, despite there being no set format for presenters to follow. This rebuke was particularly upsetting to the speaker and her collaborators because the activities of the space are defined as “member-driven” and “for the community.” As she said, “I was like ‘what the hell’. Obviously there is a major shift here, in community, behaviour, and what’s expected and what is to be gained and lost, based on standards that I was unaware were being implemented.”

We bring up this particular example not because we think that focusing on professional development activities undermine or are mutually exclusive with activist work, but rather
because professionalism is a vehicle through which paternalism can enter FIG spaces.

Indeed, many participants made negative references to the paternalistic nature of key community figureheads, usually males, who habitually offer unsolicited advice under the guise of care. This practice, termed “dadding”, is one where male “allies” enforce a standard of professionalism based on their taken-for-granted knowledge, practices, experiences, and expertise, which work to maintain the status quo rather than change hegemonic ideals reifying masculine superiority. It also replicates previous patterns within inclusivity initiatives in digital games where women’s perspectives, practices, and priorities are devalued (Fisher & Harvey, 2013).

In sum, there is a discrepancy between participant expectations from the FIG space in terms of supporting their activities. This disparity can be explained by the underlying and unrecognized privileging of neoliberal values in this space that may neutralize potential disruption to the status quo. In this, we observe intergenerational clashes between a taken-for-granted liberal feminism that maintains that the socio-economic system and anti-capitalist feminisms seeking to name and transform the patriarchal state for the emancipation of all women. Given that these professionalizing tactics have led to the departure of a number of FIG community members, we cannot underestimate the significance of clashes related to sanctioned activities in the space. In the next section, we explore how corporate values relate to FIG work and how it can contribute to these tensions related to feminist praxis.

Stakeholders, Structures, and Spaces of Intergenerational Feminism in Games
Rather than seeing these tensions as interpersonal disagreements, we can understand the growing pains within the current organizational structures of these groups as tied to their shift from grassroots community collectives to fully-fledged institutions. In this process, both organizations have become entangled with a number of educational, research, funding, and industry bodies. All of these partners require the organization to take on particular roles and responsibilities, which may not be transparent or agreed between stakeholders or community members. To satisfy different partners, members, and funders, it is often necessary for feminist organizations to construct a fluid identity (D’Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2013). However, this fluidity can make community organizing difficult if varying mandates fall out of alignment or contradict each other, particularly when this entails privileging one generational of feminism due to its symmetry with neoliberal corporate and policy interests.

For example, both organizations operate out of business-owned spaces, which means that particular institutional values and corporate discourses implicitly organize the headquarters of FIG groups. Practically, this means that the FIG organizations can be conflated with business entities, and that a hierarchal relationship can become entrenched resembling that of the “occupant” and “owner”. If the space is offered for free by the business, the activity that occurs by the FIG community members using the space must benefit the owner intangibly. This begs the question of who the FIG community is ‘in service’ to under these hierarchical conditions. It can also be a site of tension when particularly generational approaches to feminism are more or less in alignment with corporate values.
The organization of this space according to corporate institutional values can limit the available subject positions for FIG members working out of these spaces, as we saw with the use of professionalism as a disciplining tool serving to contain and constrain ‘disruptive’ women. This context would also encourage the celebratory hugbox discourse and discourages critical, and at times, uncomfortable speech acts such as call-outs. More implicitly, spaces that organize in service of a profit motive are by definition not oriented towards a transformative social justice ethos critical of capitalism. Instead, this charitable donation of space to FIG organizations might be seen as corporate social responsibility, a “carbon offset” to the misogyny and exclusion of mainstream games and tech culture.

When a feminist, non-profit ethos is not providing the driving force spatial context for such work behind a space, we it is only too easy to default back to accepting “common sense” white, liberal, and neoliberal organizing principles. This is problematic for FIG precisely because of the influx of attention and funding currently available for running diversity initiatives in digital games. Inclusivity becomes a resource to be capitalized on by businesses and organizations: “Diversity still benefits those in power by taking advantage of the various experiences and vantage points of different backgrounds. Rather than respecting difference and redistributing power based on it, diversity only “celebrates” difference in order to exploit multiculturalism for its economic value” (Kyra, 2014). It is partly based on this uncritical definition of diversity and difference that FIG developed as a politicized response to WIG, and it is in the
sedimentation of particular values within institutional values that represent the greatest challenge here to redistributing power.

Space and the attendant stakeholder requirements is not the only pressure faced by FIG community organizers, but also the broader context in which they must operate as they become established and aim to make a sustainable contribution to shifting the status quo in games. In this process, they must subsume their individual needs and play to a number of diverse requirements and values. As one organizer puts it, engaging is sometimes very hard because they feel like it is “not about having any glory for yourself” and “it is supposed to be a larger purpose and not for your own ego”. This can have a concrete impact on feminist praxis, as it can shape the mission and activist of the group as well as their identity. For example, one organizer in her 20s described how she felt she could not include the word ‘feminist’ in applications to become an official not-for-profit organization, citing the government’s negative association with feminism. In her view, adjusting the description of the group to adhere to rules and language of bureaucracy is acceptable because it makes the process of registration easier, though the organization’s goals are more subversive than reported. This is not thus a matter of liberal feminism being imposed from other generations of feminist activists, but adopted by organizers as a means (in this case, obtaining recognition) to an end (making digital games more inclusive for women).

We can think about this as needing to ‘strike a balance’, to underplay explicit feminism to make it acceptable when working within other value systems, an approach that then led to
the clashes between intergeneration feminisms identified above for the participants in the groups. In this way, we can see that generations of feminism do not map easily onto age. Participants who regularly contribute to the community in ways that are aligned with the ‘governing values’ of the space enjoy a mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship with the organization, with their activities becoming privileged forms of engagement. Friction is felt by those who are not the ideal subjects of a liberal generation-mode of feminist organizing, including those who do not approach game-making for profit as a goal and those who vocally challenge the harms of capitalism-compliant feminism. In our research, these subjects were largely in the same age group, ranging from their mid-20s to their early 30s. In sum, through these interactions with mainstream corporate and governmental agencies that FIG communities groups are compelled to delimit the available subject-positions for women to occupy in games.

The importance of the spaces, structures, and stakeholders shaping FIG praxis cannot be underestimated. When we asked participants about their dreams for the future of the FIG community, these were immediately tied to spaces. Participants shared fanciful and playful visions of treehouses and crystal castles, but also articulated practical aspects such as the rules governing these spaces. These articulations of an imaginary supportive space highlighted how participants felt restricted by and within the FIG contexts they had access to. Our participants want FIG space to be supportive of unconventional practices, not have to “play by the rules” of the patriarchy because the rules were not determined with them in mind. The dreams-themed group interview thus demonstrated the necessity
of physical space to carry out FIG work, free from the constraints of other institutional values and in particular those that only align with liberal feminist values.

Conclusions
The tensions and contradictions indicated within FIG communities demonstrates how, as with all challenges to the status quo, such activism, including that of the authors of this paper, is inescapably enmeshed within the hegemonic systems and discourses that it aims to change. FIG spaces are discursively disciplined by a range of hegemonic forces, including those that normatively frame digital games as masculine and those that characterize certain generations of feminist organizing and participation as desirable and others as unruly and ultimately unwelcome. In trying to organize ourselves to address social inequities through activism, feminists in games are struggling to change these taken-for-granted frameworks for understanding participation in both games and feminism, particularly in opposition to the less critical and more commercially-friendly approach of WIG. This includes how we think and talk about the purpose of FIG spaces and the perspectives and practices of those who occupy it. In the specific communities we examined, our participants expressed some discomfort with the process of becoming a feminist subject, in aligning with different generations of feminism and their compatibilities with liberal institutional norms, and in particular how their participation was felt to be failing or excelling. As these community groups have gone through the process of developing and establishing themselves, participants discussed friction they encountered as organizational standards evolved, particularly in terms of those that affirmed specific ideal subjects and particular forms of feminist praxis. In entrenching
limited forms of legitimate belonging, engagement, and participation, these FIG spaces could at times feel constraining to participants who found these norms to be out of alignment with their feminist visions and practices. These ruptures thus indicated the clashes that can emerge through beyond intergenerational feminist contact, particularly in terms of the intersection of gender with other subject positions and with corporate values.

The emergent exclusion that occurs as community groups establish themselves is important to note as both organizations in this study have undertaken as their mission the provision of spaces for women to engage in game design, develop personal support networks, and play, discuss, and critique digital games. Community leaders in one group described a desire to remain “flexible and nimble” in programming so as to be as widely appealing and inclusive as possible. However, from the experiences of participants involved in starting up and participating in FIG organizations to varying degrees, this commitment to full inclusivity was not always fulfilled, especially when they envisioned a more intersectional or radical politics. As these ruptures indicate, the mobilization of a FIG agenda can fence off participation in its very pursuit of the creation of safe, inclusive space.

Furthermore, through a consideration of the broader contexts shaping this organizing, we have indicated how it is perhaps the institutionalization and subsumption of these actions by capital that may be the greatest challenge to be faced moving forward. For this reason we must be critical of the dominant White, liberal feminism most compatible with capitalism that can seep into FIG activism. When feminist action and communities are
organized around gender identity, or at least in a manner that privileges gender over other
identity markers, this can maintain the power and status of dominant groups. This does
not challenge hegemonic power relations or systems and by extension allows the
patriarchy to remain comfortably in charge, as exemplified by of the example of
professionalization priorities disciplining others forms of expression and feminist
practice.

Participants who occupy a privileged position in this space, the ideal subjects of FIG
organizing, articulate a teleological narrative about their feminist praxis where “we are
heading somewhere good” if we just keep going. This is the narrative of the hugbox, and
it can serve to frame struggles and tensions as necessary for producing the perfect
community, something that we as authors are also guilty of in our previous reporting on
this community group (CITATION BLINDEDFisher and Harvey, 2013; Harvey and
Fisher, 2013). A teleological narrative positing consensus in the community downplays
the continuing struggles of women of colour, queer and trans women, poor women, and
others. Those who are not in privileged positions do not want a single narrative or history
and seek to highlight multiple narratives of experience challenging the status quo. As
Mattie Brice’s account of GDC reminds us, the path to true inclusivity in games is not the
one laid down by liberal feminism. This generation of privileged feminism cannot
sufficiently embrace the messiness inherent in working with a changing community with
diverse, dynamic, and unpredictable needs.

The formation of the FIG projects we researched based on that at times aligned more
closely with white, liberal feminism despite the recognition of intersectional not a bait-and-switch. Community organizers are not acting in bad faith or knowingly misrepresenting themselves as committed to diversity merely to mobilize the current cultural capital of diversity and inclusion in games. Rather this is another reminder that FIG activism within and beyond these organizations is enmeshed within the same power structures that it is working to change. We cannot completely opt out of participating in capitalism or fully escape neoliberalism when community organizations rely on corporate, government, and academic support for their existence.

However, neither are we helpless victims of subjection. We can choose to make a difference, starting within ourselves. Instead of calling out, we can call in to unlearn our privileges. Such a task is not easy, especially for women in leadership roles and positions of power, whose reflections on the “unintentional violence” caused by their actions or decisions is intensely felt, as it is heightened by an amplified sense of responsibility and accountability to community members who already view themselves as vulnerable. In this way, feminist organizing and communities can become a “machine of pain” for women who enjoy some form of privilege.

To conclude on a positive note, it is that these women are incredible resilient, demonstrating a commitment to changing the world by first changing themselves. This is best demonstrated by their willingness to return time and time again to this “machine of pain”– to put their broken spirits through the ringer because they believe in their communities. Growing pains might be uncomfortable for feminists but it reflects the
original desire to partake in action for change. This means that uncomfortable reflections like those in the conversations we had with our participants and within this article can challenge perceptions of feminism, inclusivity, and equality in this domain. The outcome of these machines of pain- the constitution of a critical community- may be FIG’s greatest contribution to enacting social change in the game industry and its culture more broadly.

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1*Lean In* is the title of a best-selling book by Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook. “Lean In” feminism has been widely critiqued as promoting neoliberal, White “faux feminism” (see Faludi, 2013; hooks, 2013).

2Activities, events, and groups that prioritize marginalized groups, such as women, can be subject to derogatory comments related to their implicit exclusion of those who have historically held privileged positions, a sort of reverse-sexism charge. The two community groups we examined have faced surprisingly little critique along these lines, potentially because they have implemented a range of modes for supportive men to contribute to the project, including as mentors, allies, and volunteers.