

CHAPTER 6.

UNDERSTANDING GAMING AND GENDER WITHIN THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY HOMES

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Recent studies suggest that the digital divide between Latinos and Whites has significantly narrowed over the past decade (Livingston, 2011; Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Latino adults are acquiring smartphones, video gaming consoles, and tablet computers at an equal or higher rate than White and Black non-Latino adults (Rainie, 2012; The Nielson Company, 2014; Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Yet, beyond these numbers, we actually know little about how Latinos, in particular girls and women, participate in gaming culture (Jenkins, 2006; Watkins, 2011). Latino men and boys are far more often to be the focus of discussions of Latino gamers, while Latinas, if mentioned at all, are treated primarily as “female” gamers (Entertainment Software Association, 2014; Gamboa, 2014; Louie, 2003).

Even less is known about the physical arrangements where games are played and the social context of the homes where video gaming takes place (Stevens, Satwicz, & McCarthy, 2008). In this chapter, we examine how Latino women and girls participate in gaming in the physical context of their home and in the socio-cultural context of their family life. By so doing, our goal is to move beyond the masculinity/femininity binary, and understand gaming practices of women and girls as socially, culturally, and physically contextualized. To this end, we analyze the physical arrangements of gaming devices in the home, and how family members interact with games and each other around games, the values that they bring to the gaming experiences, and the identities they develop around games within their family context.

Our data comes from a six-month ethnographic study we conducted with Mexican-American families, many of whom were first generation immigrants, primarily spoke Spanish at home, and had low income. Our findings provide a detailed account of the gaming experiences of Latino women and girls in the context of family life to illuminate the material conditions and social dynamics that are at play in shaping their participation and identities.

BACKGROUND

While the number of female gamers has significantly increased over the last decade (Entertainment Software Association, 2014), gender disparity continues to exist with respect to the nature of video gaming experiences between female and male gamers. Studies consistently show that women and girls often play social games that are now available on mobile devices, whereas men and boys play multi-user strategy and first-person shooter games that are relatively more sophisticated, require long-time commitment, and help develop computer and gaming literacy (Hayes, 2008). Much of the popular discussion has even speculated that the differences in gaming experiences between the two genders contribute to the low number of girls pursuing careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields, emphasizing the important role early gaming experiences play in shaping girls and women's values and identities.

Literature on gender and video gaming have for a long time attributed the difference between males and females with respect to engagement in gaming and the kind of games they play to one of the two elements: (a) *gendered preferences* that females and males bring to their gaming experiences, and (b) *gendered culture* of video gaming that is often openly hostile towards females. Consequently, game designers and marketers have attempted to increase the participation of women and girls in gaming through a range of strategies. These include designing games that embody the values of females (e.g. collaboration), designing game content that especially appeals to women/girls (e.g. non-violent content), creating interventions that aim to increase the number of female game designers, and raising awareness around the representation of female characters in video games. More recently, scholars have developed a more nuanced way of conceptualizing participation of females in video gaming that acknowledges the *situatedness* of women's and girls' gaming practices and the *fluidity* of their identities (Jenson & de Castell, 2010).

Compared to what we know about female players, research about Latino players, and in particular Latino women and girls' gaming, is sparse. Recent large-scale surveys suggest that Latinos play video games more often than non-Latinos, and usually play

video games on consoles and handheld devices (Lenhart, Jones, & MacGill, 2008; Think Now Research, 2015). Latino parents tend to have negative perceptions of video games, and joint media engagement occurs more often around television than video games (Lee, & Barron, 2015; Wartella et al., 2014).

While understanding what motivates players provides rich insights into what and how games are played, understanding the contexts in which games are played is equally important. The ubiquity of gaming consoles, computers, and handheld devices in the last decade, has allowed people to engage in gaming in the comfort of their own homes. Family context has become increasingly relevant to the game industry with companies like Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony specifically targeting families to purchase their gaming consoles with “family-friendly” games. In this chapter, we conceptualize video gaming as a situated activity within the everyday lives of families as opposed to an isolated activity of individuals. Families “with their own practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories, and histories” make up one of the most important *communities of practice* in which children participate (Wenger, 1998, p.6). Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a community of practice (CoP) as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p.98), suggesting that we belong to multiple communities at any given time.

Traditionally, the CoP framework has been applied to studies of Massively Multiple-Player Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) in order to understand how players form a group around common interests, develop expertise and shared practices by participating in the joint activity of play. Yet, gaming as a shared activity exists not only in online spaces, but also in physical spaces like the home, where family members who share a common interest in playing games participate in the activity almost always with and around other family members often in the same room. Through engaging in gaming, families as communities of practice form norms, values, identities, and structures that enable or constrain the development of knowledge and diverse repertoires of gaming among individual members. Understanding gaming as a situated activity within families as a community of practice allows us to identify the social structures that provide opportunities and constrain the participation of women and girls in gaming. Additionally, it focuses our attention to capturing the key aspects of the gaming experiences of women and girls, including the way resources are organized around gaming, the identities that are taken up around games, the norms family members share, and the values they bring to their individual and shared gaming experiences. This socio-cultural view of gaming shifts the focus from psychological explanations for the game play patterns

and preferences of women and girls (e.g., assuming that women are innately more collaborative or more risk-adverse) to understanding the gaming experiences of women and girls as trajectories of participation mediated by social, cultural, and material contexts.

CONTEXT

The data for this chapter comes from an ethnographic study we conducted with 16 Mexican-American families over a six-month period. Families who had at least one child (“focal child”) between the ages of 4 and 6, and at least one child 7 years and older, and owned at least one platform for gaming (e.g. console, computer, cell phone, or tablet) participated in our study. Specifically, we worked with families who had origins in Mexico, the largest Latino population in Phoenix (United States Census Bureau, 2013), and resided in Maricopa County, which is both the most populous county in Arizona, and one of the largest Latino population counties in the country (Brown & Lopez, 2013).

We visited these 16 families every 2 months, and collected surveys and conducted interviews with parents and children both separately and together. We also observed family and child gameplay at home, and asked parents to keep photo-diaries of gaming between home visits. All except 2 families were first generation immigrants with both parents, and in some cases an older sibling, born in Mexico. Twelve out of 16 mothers spoke Spanish only, 2 mothers spoke primarily Spanish and some English, and 2 mothers spoke English exclusively although they knew Spanish. The two mothers who spoke English exclusively were born in the United States, were second-generation immigrants, and had the highest family income in our sample. For this chapter, we selected three families where the number of males exceeded the number of females, and both genders participated in video gaming within the household. Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of the participants in the report of our study.

ILLUMINATIVE CASES

Across the three cases, we identified different modes of engagement around video games, and examined how gender dynamics and family values shape women’s and girls’ participation and identities around video games. We conceptualize women and girls’ engagement in gaming activity or practice as *legitimate peripheral participation* within the family as a community of practice. It is “legitimate” because family members recognize the participation of women and girls in the gaming activity. It is “peripheral” because women and girls hang out at the edge of the practice as novices

within the family. It is “participation” because women and girls are actively playing games.

CASE 1: Different Family Expectations around Gaming

Our first case focuses on Amelia Perez (age 7), the youngest child of Zoe (age 36) and David (age 31) both of whom were second-generation immigrants from Mexico. She has two older brothers, Matias (age 9) and Daniel (age 11). Zoe is a stay-at-home mom while David works as an accountant. All family members were born in the United States, and spoke primarily English. The family owns 3 TVs, one of which is located in Amelia’s room. The Nintendo Wii and Xbox 360 as well as one of the three desktop computers are located in the living room. The family also owns a PSP and a Nintendo DS, which Amelia won at a church event, but these devices were not being used at the time of the study. The Nintendo Wii was initially purchased as a Christmas present for Amelia but currently was being used mainly by her mother Zoe for playing *Just Dance* and watching movies on *Netflix*. The Xbox is the whole family’s property but is often used by Amelia’s brothers to play video games.

The family’s interest in video gaming stems from dad, David Perez, who has been gaming since he was very young. He mostly plays games with his son Daniel because Daniel, as compared to the younger Amelia and Matias, is more capable of keeping up with the complex games David plays. At the time of our visit, the father-son duo was playing *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*. Since he works full time, David has limited time to play with Amelia and Matias, but he regularly engages with conversations with them about the games they play and the progress they make. Daniel also has a busy schedule with soccer practice and academic responsibilities. When he gets a chance to play video games, he either plays with his father or his younger brother Matias. As the middle child, Matias not only interacts with his older brother around games but also plays an important role in Amelia’s everyday experiences as her playmate. Matias plays with Amelia, coaches her on how to play, reads instructions and text in the games for her.

In the Perez household, expertise around video games is passed onto one generation to another with the father modeling ways of thinking and learning around video games to his oldest son Daniel who then models it for his siblings. For example, Daniel introduced the game *Wizard 101* and *Minecraft* to Matias, and they played these games together quite often until Daniel “grew out of” these games, and moved onto playing more complex games with his father. Amelia started playing these games with Matias who has more expertise with these games than Amelia. At the

time of our visit, in addition to playing *Minecraft* with Matias, Amelia played *Roblox* with other children she met online, *Just Dance* with her mother, and *Spore* by herself. Overall, Amelia spent 5 to 8 hours a week playing various video games, and more importantly her gaming experience included activities such as talking about games, observing other family members play video games, and searching online for information about different games alone and with other family members.

A few minutes into our conversation with the entire family during our first visit, it was clear that there was a divide between Zoe and David with respect to the value of video gaming. This divide created a conflict not only between the parents but also between Zoe and her children, and had some impact on how young Amelia organized her gaming experiences. Zoe did not play video games except *Just Dance* with Amelia to exercise. She played *Farmville* in the past, but quit playing because, in her words, she got “so addicted” to it. She and all other family members identified her as the person who monitors and reinforces rules with children around gaming including how much time they spend playing video games, the kinds of games they play, and with whom they play. When we met Zoe, she expressed deep concern as a mother about the number of hours her daughter spent playing video games. She already had “lost” her boys to video games, and was trying to avoid this happening again with her daughter. For example, it was her idea to hide Nintendo DS and tell Amelia that it was in the “repair shop” to limit Amelia’s gaming to the desktop computer and the gaming consoles in the living room.

The sharp contrast between the way Zoe and the other family members supported Amelia’s interest in animals speaks to the divide in the family. Zoe prefers to have long walks with Amelia and talk to her daughter about animals whereas other family members encourage Amelia to play *Spore* as a means to support her interest in animals. When we interviewed Amelia about her gaming practices, she showed an awareness of her mother’s sense of being left out by sharing with us that she plays *Just Dance* with her mother because that is the only game that her mother can play, and that her mother is happy when Amelia spends time with her. That said, Amelia likes playing *Minecraft* with Matias the most because they continue role-playing by taking on different characters in *Minecraft* beyond the game itself, and she enjoys spending time playing video games with his brothers.

CASE 2: Stepping In-and-Out of Different Roles around Gaming

Juliana Ornez (age 39) our second case, is a mother of four boys: Felipe (age 6), Alvaro (age 8), Edmund (age 12), and Levi (age 15). She moved to United States from Mexico

with her husband Julio (age 41) when she was 28 years old. As a stay at home mom with a husband who works 48 hours in a physically demanding job, Juliana is the primary caregiver in the family and spends time with the boys the most. Spanish is the primary language spoken in the Ornez household. Juliana speaks Spanish only, while her children speak both English and Spanish. Video gaming is a family routine in Ornez household. The family owns 1 gaming console, 1 handheld gaming device, 2 tablets, 1 iPod Touch, 2 computers, and 2 smart phones. In any given day, there are multiple opportunities for family members to play video games either together or alone.

Juliana did not play video games growing up because her family was unable to afford purchasing technology other than radio and later television. However, as an adult, she values having technology around the house and plays video games on her cell phone, on a handheld gaming device and on a tablet that belongs to Felipe and Edmund. At the time of our visit, she played *Angry Birds* and *Don't Touch the White Tile* on her cell phone. Felipe and Alvaro each own a tablet while Edmund owns the iPod Touch. The Xbox the family owns is located in the living room. Juliana and her husband Julio each own a smart phone. Juliana limits the amount of time Felipe and Alvaro play video games. She also limits their gameplay to certain times of day or the week, the types of games she allows them to play, and whom they can play with. She tries to reinforce these rules with her older sons, Edmund and Levi, but finds it difficult to limit their gaming although she is concerned about the content of the games they play (e.g. *Black Ops I & II* and *Grand Theft Auto 5*).

Despite Juliana's attempts to regulate video gaming in the family, ownership seems to determine who makes the rules around different devices. For example, while the Xbox was located in a shared living space, Edmund and Levi regulated its use because the device was originally purchased for them. At the time of our visit, the younger siblings Felipe and Alvaro were not allowed to play games on the Xbox by Edmund and Levi. The only other person in the family who was invited to play games on Xbox with Edmund and Levi is dad Julio. Juliana never plays games on the Xbox because the games that her older sons are playing do not appeal to her and she also finds it hard to use the controllers. Similarly, while Felipe and Alvaro share a room together, the owner of the device determines the rules around who uses which tablet.

Despite her concerns over her children's gaming, Juliana's identity around games in the family revolves not around being a "rule-maker" but being a "co-participant" in gaming. Juliana regularly plays games with Felipe and Alvaro on her cell phone and on their tablets. She plays with Felipe and Alvaro at least weekly. Felipe reported that

her mother is the one who plays the most with him in the family. At the time of our second visit, Felipe and Juliana played *Angry Birds*, *Don't Touch the White Tile*, and *Clash of Clans*. Juliana solves a problem or a difficult part for Felipe and Alvaro, explains what is happening in the game to them, and visits websites with them a few times a month. She regularly engages with conversations around video games with Felipe and Alvaro. For example, she has conversations about their performance in a game, what they learned through gaming, what makes a game fun, how to score higher in a game, and topics related to a game that come up in other contexts. She also likes to have conversations with Felipe and Alvaro about the games she plays. Additionally, at least weekly she reads instructions to Felipe who is in the process of learning to read.

CASE 3: Gendered Spaces and Crossing Boundaries within the Home

The Cruz family lives in a 3-bedroom house in an urban neighborhood. Valentina (age 7) is the youngest child of Sara (age 38) and Rodrigo (age 42) both of whom moved to the United States from Mexico when they were teenagers. Sara is a stay at home mom who frequently volunteers at her children's school while Rodrigo works full time outside of home as a painter. Valentina and her two older brothers Tomas (age 14) and Gabriel (age 11) were born in the United States, and speak both English and Spanish fluently. Spanish is the primary language spoken in the house although the boys speak English among themselves. The Cruz family owns a gaming console (PS3), 3 smart phones, 2 tablets, and 1 computer. The brothers share a room, and have the gaming console in their room. Sara, Rodrigo, and their oldest son Tomas use a smart phone. Valentina and Gabriel each own a tablet but rarely use their devices. The only computer in the house is located in the living room.

Valentina interacts with other family members the most around video games. She plays games with her mother, father, and her older brother Tomas. Although Sara is not a gamer herself, she plays with Valentina a few times a month on Sara's cell phone. At the time we visited the family, Valentina and her mother regularly played *Flappy Birds*, *Don't Touch the White Tile*, and *Candy Crush* together. Sara used to play video games off-and-on while growing up in Mexico but stopped playing as an adult because she does not find the content of most video games appealing nor has the time to play video games. She also believes she is not good at using controllers. That said, she spends as much time as Tomas does playing video games with Valentina. Both Sara and Tomas watch Valentina play video games a few times a week. Having taken more of an expert role with respect to gaming, Tomas also coaches Valentina, plays a

difficult part for her, explains to Valentina what is happening in the game, and visits supporting websites with Valentina.

At the time of our first visit, Valentina enjoyed playing *Sonic Dash*, a game that Tomas introduced to her and a game that Tomas himself played on his phone. Her favorite games were the ones that were geared towards gender stereotypical themes such as *Paint Nails*, dressing Disney princesses, and taking care of pets. This was consistent with her interest in dressing pink, playing with Disney princess dolls, and wanting to be as beautiful as Disney princesses when she grows up in real life. When we asked Sara about the video games Valentina played, she reported that she prefers Valentina playing the *Paint Nails*, and dress-up games over *Flappy Birds* because they were more educational in her opinion as they teach Valentina mixing and matching colors. “You learn which colors go with that,” she explains “and when you want to pick out a specific color.” Sara also expected Valentina to play more games like *Flappy Birds* as she grows older and whatever is popular among kids her age. Tomas and Gabriel, who play games like *Call of Duty* on their PS3, had a distinct distaste for the pink games that Valentina played. Yet, they occasionally joined Valentina and Sara in playing *Flappy Birds* at the kitchen table where they each take turn to complete the level.

Because the PS3 was located in the room that Tomas and Gabriel share Valentina had limited access to a gaming console. Sometimes her brothers let Valentina play on the PS3 but for a very limited time. She usually used her mother’s cell phone or the desktop computer in the living room to play video games. Sara compared to other parents in our study was lenient with rules around video games. The violent content of some games Tomas and Gabriel played did not bother her as much as it bothered other parents in our study. She believed children needed to be exposed to things in real life, and learn for themselves what is right and what is wrong. She explains:

“I hear people saying ‘No, but it’s too much violence [in games]’ and Ok, I do see the violence in those games, I do. But I am not scared or I don’t think it’s way too much...I can’t always have them here and always protecting them, you know? One or two times you have to let them go out so that they themselves learn how to protect each other. Because, what good is it to have them sheltered, then tomorrow comes and something happens to you, who is going to take care of them?”

The only rule Sara reinforced around video games is that all children complete their homework before playing games. Despite the shared rules around video games, the physical arrangement of devices created gendered spaces in the house with Sara and

Valentina occupying the kitchen and the living room while playing, and Tomas and Gabriel using their own room for their gaming practices. The only time family members crossed the physical boundaries was when Tomas and Gabriel played a FIFA game in their room. Sara loves playing and watching soccer, so when Tomas and Gabriel play FIFA, she goes to their room with Valentina to watch them play the game.

CONCLUSIONS

We began this chapter with the argument that attributing differences in gaming experiences between females and males to individual preferences is too narrow a focus to understand key aspects of gender and gaming. We offered a socially, physically, and culturally situated account of how women and girls participate in gaming through their interaction with other family members with whom they have shared histories, stories, and practices. Instead of viewing gaming as isolated individual activity, we conceptualized it as an activity that family members participate in as a family. Through this conception, our goal was to understand the identities that women and girls enact, the forms of engagement they exhibit, and the values they bring to the gaming experience as the members of a community of practice.

While we recognize the intersectionality of gender, race, and class (Andersen & Collins, 1995), the cultural background of families in our study did not seem to play a key role in social and physical arrangements around video games. There is so little research on family interactions around games in general that it is impossible to make any comparisons between Latino and non-Latino families. Video gaming is quite popular in Mexico so it would not be perceived as a distinctly U.S. practice (eMarketer, 2014). In fact, many parents who participated in our research played arcade games and owned gaming consoles while growing up but had stopped playing as adults. The only gaming practice that was distinctively connected to families' Mexican roots was watching children play FIFA games as a family. That is, families extended their common practice and repertoire of playing and watching soccer together to include the FIFA game as a spectator sport.

As our findings suggest, women and girls engage in video gaming in variety of ways. In addition to playing games and watch other people play games, women and girls talk about games with other family members, solve problems or play a difficult part for other family members, and visit websites related to games. Males provide support to women and girls by introducing games, being a role model, and coaching them around games. Additionally, women and girls position themselves differently in

relation to gaming in a family context, taking roles like “gamer”, “rule-maker”, “spectator”, and “co-participant”. As we have seen in the case of Amelia, family dynamics play a role in females stepping in and out of different positions in relation to gaming. Overall, our study highlights games as part of the daily experiences of women and girls as much as men and boys in the context of family life.

At the same time, our study also points to some aspects of gaming experiences of Latino women and girls that align with gender stereotypes in the context of families. To begin with, consistent with the current literature, we observed that women and girls interacted with gaming consoles such as Xbox and PS3 the least in families. However, one important reason behind this lack of interaction is difficulty with the hardware (i.e. gaming controllers) for women. The gaming experiences of the mothers in our study revolved around hand held devices like smart phones and tablets that allowed them to play games alone and with their younger children. Additionally, the physical and social arrangement of devices introduced barriers for girls to access and use gaming consoles at home. Secondly, mothers, as opposed to fathers, expressed concern over their children’s gaming and reinforced rules around games in our study; however, mothers expressed their concern and reinforced rules around games irrespective of the gender of their children. In fact, it seemed mothers’ attitudes were related to what games they found educational and what they considered to be the best use of time for their children and family.

An important implication of our findings is the need to capitalize on the interest and active engagement of women and girls in gaming in the context of families. The discussions around gender and content of current games have been limited to designing games that involve stereotypically “female friendly” topics (e.g. helping others) and depict female characters in a positive light as a means to turn more women and girls onto gaming. However, as our data shows, games like *Spore* and *FIFA* with neither stereotypically male nor female content can be appealing to women and girls, and have potential to move the gaming experiences of women and girls beyond so called social or pink games. Women and girls spend significant time playing games in the presence of males and interacting around games with them in the family context. Thus, it is important to diversify the design of family friendly games to provide opportunities for productive gaming experiences for both genders, and help women and girls progress through a trajectory of gaming. We believe video games that are enjoyable and challenging for both genders can have a significant impact on sustaining women’s and girls’ interest in gaming.

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