

I am Queer. I am a Gamer. I am a Gaymer.:
Phenomenology of In/Exclusion of Gaymer Communities

by

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ABSTRACT

This study utilizes semiotic phenomenology as a method of inquiry to describe the lived experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) gamers (gaymers). I begin by discussing my issues with the current gaming literature, arguing that the gamer community is a space that privileges cis, heterosexual, and hypermasculine men while oppressing those who may not fit this mold. I discuss the shortcomings of the current literature that attempts to critically look at race and gaming, noting that race in the gaming community is still portrayed as secondary. I focus special attention to how this space allows for more inclusion than the larger gamer and LGBTQ communities while also critiquing those whom this space privileges. Through interviews of members of the local gaymer organization, the Phoenix Gaymers, I discuss ways in which the gaymer community is more inclusive and conscious of others but still follows forms of what I describe to be gaymer privilege. I focus on gaymer privilege within the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, where I argue from the phenomenological descriptions, reductions, and interpretations that there are still overt issues of sexism and transphobia as well as implicit issues of white privilege. While I describe the issues that are found within the Phoenix Gaymers, I also attempt to provide suggestions for change within the organization as well as in academic scholarship to create more awareness and inclusion for female, transgender, genderqueer, and queer people of color gaymers.

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Chapter 1: Setting the World Map in Ga(y)mer Communities

Story and Objectives

Scene 1: I remember finding my mother's high heels and maternity dress in her closet as a young child. I also remember wishing that I had a crown to wear. I wanted to be Princess Toadstool from *Super Mario Bros. 2*. She was my favorite character to play as and I wanted to pretend that I could float in the air. The rhythmic clomping of high heels mesmerized me and I wanted to make that same rhythmic sound when I walked. But "little boys don't wear dresses or put on high heels," my parents told me; they laughed as they took the dress and high heels away from me.

Scene 2: I remember the first time I entered a Friday Night Magic tournament at my local comic and card store. The smell of comics and cards under fluorescent lighting and seeing all the detailed figurines with rows and cases of cards and comics was overpowering for me. I remember being excited and extremely nervous as my awkward 13-year-old self met a friend from middle school so we could register for the tournament together. There were other people in the back of the store where the tournament was being held. Some were to themselves while others were playing *Magic: The Gathering* to pass the time.

Scene 3: *Final Fantasy XI* (FFXI) is a particular online game that I have many bittersweet memories of. I was a reclusive, awkward, and insecure 15-year-old having difficulties adjusting to moving from California to Texas and starting at a new high school. I was bullied and found myself attracted to my male classmates; I questioned why I couldn't get turned on by some of my female classmates. I was often ashamed, loathing myself for being different and not being known in a more positive way. Miserable and

wishing that I could move back to California, I turned to *FFXI*, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), where I wished I could live my life and have my “real” life be secondary. My friends from the game grew concerned for me but could do nothing more but talk to me. There were several who I thought were female gamers because they played with female avatars; I grew close to them and I remember feeling as if I could bond with one of my friends on a deeper level. But when we finally got voice chat to talk to one another, I was shocked to hear their deep, manly voices, especially the husky, deep lisp of a friend who I considered an older “sister” and who, to my horror, was actually a gay man. I thought I was "normal" because I thought my gamer friends were women in real life and that it would be okay to flirt and have romantic feelings towards them. I felt betrayed. I felt cursed. What I was escaping - my awareness of my sexual orientation, and my darkest secret - I never left it behind in the “real world.” It was always with me. I loathed myself in that moment.

This project is about navigating through the space of the LGBTQ community in gaming and the experiences involved in feeling included and excluded inside of it, as well as describing the ways an LGBTQ individual who identifies as a gamer, or “gaymer,” can feel welcomed or unwelcomed in a gaymer community. I began with these three scenes to not only show how I became a gamer, but to show how these moments helped shape me as a gaymer. Gaming became a safe space and a community that I would come to feel safe in. As I grew older, I had many difficulties in my personal life and adjusting to a new state and school; I was becoming more aware that I was gay and, therefore, "different." When I learned I still had feelings for a friend from school and when I learned the person I'd befriended in *FFXI* was actually an openly gay man, the

relationships and communities I was a part of both in real life and in game began to merge; my perceptions of the safe space within the game suddenly became unclear. I wanted to escape from my problems but discovered that they were following me into the game. My virtual identity was shattering and I found myself deceived and vulnerable. Realizing that some of my friends performed a different gender in game than who they were in real life and that I was playing alongside LGBTQ gamers or players who were homophobic or had religious beliefs different from mine, my worldview began to change. I was left wondering if this community is one I belong to or even truly know.

Years later, when I was in my third year of college, I remember while I was giving a performance on my experiences of coming out I talked about being a *gaymer*. My 20-year-old self thought the pun was especially clever; I did not think that a gaymer community was an actual thing until years later. When I engage with other gamers, especially in an MMORPG setting, I find myself not entirely hiding my sexuality, yet I am also not completely open about it. I do not choose to “closet” my sexuality, but I also do not try to present myself as queer. My closet becomes my space:

Do... I want to get rid of it? Sometimes, some things are best untold. I am always told that to be out means to be proud, but I'm happy with who I am. I'm happy with...[m]y closet. My personal, private space. And maybe there are lots of reasons that it's with me. And maybe I am not always the one who gets to decide.

(Omori, 2010)

A closet allows me to choose whether or not I reveal who I am; it becomes a personal safeguard against feeling vulnerable and othered.

When I played FFXI, whether I felt adequate enough to get through a quest or objective, I still felt uncomfortable with sharing my sexuality. But I slowly started easing up and started feeling comfortable just socializing without feeling the need to be aggressive. Instead of trying to act masculine and trying to hide who I was through homophobic slurs or degrading remarks about women, I balanced out. Years later, when we played *Final Fantasy XIV* (FFXIV, another MMORPG), I dressed my avatar how I wanted him to look, including a shirt that revealed his midriff; I made him more queer. My friends from FFXI never said anything; I didn't tell them my sexuality outright, but it was suddenly a part of me. It was at that moment that I became especially aware of who I am. I am queer. I am a gamer. I am a *gaymer*.

I remember feeling out of place in the LGBTQ community here in Phoenix. I found myself trying to get involved and trying to advocate for gay rights while in high school and as an undergraduate at ASU; I was unsuccessful. The LGBTQ community at my high school wasn't very relatable to me. I needed to like fashion, I had to be well caught-up and well-versed in gay politics. I hated and didn't know any of that. A friend of mine, Rick¹, was the only other queer person that I felt I could make a tenable connection with. I admired him as a leader for GLBT² rights at our school and so he became a sort of representation of the LGBTQ community for me. Ultimately, I felt as if he and I were too different in our interests and personalities. He mentioned to me once

¹ Pseudonym is used to protect the anonymity of the person.

² I use "GLBT" instead of "LGBTQ" to signify a strong difference that I felt in high school that ultimately led me to feeling isolated from the community. I intend for "GLBT" to present how little I perceived to know about LGBTQ issues and that I always felt different and unsupported by my peers who identified as gay and lesbian in high school. I not only state this as a temporal term that was more commonly used at the time but to show how my experience was different from other LGBTQ individuals.

that he never got into video games – something that was important in my life; it was as if the only thing we had in common was that we were gay guys. Looking back, I feel that I was more of a nuisance to him than a friend because of his apparent apathy towards me. Losing that sense of possible connection with Rick created feelings of confusion, alienation, and anger in me and I slowly began to associate those feelings with the LGBTQ community itself.

This disorientation continued throughout my undergraduate years as I tried to get involved with the LGBTQ Coalition at Arizona State University. I was met with the same feelings of awkwardness and of feeling out of place that I was oh-so-familiar with. Despite getting to know some of the members of the coalition, I was often met with a sense of distance and hostility from them. I was not white. I was not a hardcore, bleeding liberal. I was not an extreme activist for LGBTQ rights. Only within the past couple of years would I be able to critique and speak out about the limitations the larger, mainstream LGBTQ community has. I grew more cynical and resentful of the LGBTQ community in Phoenix and my university and, as such, I associated these feelings with identifying as “gay.” I view identifying as queer as embracing myself rather than as putting myself down; this is why I reject the word gay and instead choose to identify as queer.

Gaming has always been a huge part of my life. This was always something that I embraced. Well, almost. I was – and still am – a huge Nintendo fanboy. I especially fell in love with the *Pokémon* series. I prided myself in being one of the best players in elementary school and loved collecting and completing the first few sets of the trading card game. When middle school came around, however, I did not realize that it had

become taboo to like *Pokémon*. I endured bullying for most of middle school: my already graying hair was the cause of ageist insults and I was made fun of for being part Japanese, but it was showing that I liked *Pokémon* and that I was a gamer that really ignited my bullies. I made sure to make it clear that I did not play – or still like – *Pokémon*, yet it was the game that my best friend at the time and I bonded over the most. This was also the time when I found a group of people who *did* play *Pokémon*. As I got older and began to interact with other gay men, I was shocked to learn that many of them had never played video games or had much interest in them. It was even more upsetting to learn that some of them had never even heard of *Pokémon*! I quickly latched on to anyone who might have had even a remote interest in gaming, but those relationships rarely ever lasted. Despite my experiences of being bullied and of missing out on relationships, I still embrace the fact that I am a gamer.

I used the word “gaymer” as a pun for the performance I did as an undergraduate (Omori, 2010) to explain the fact that I was gay and loved video games; I decided to adopt the pun to describe myself because I felt it described me the best; this was before I began to refer to myself as queer. I remember learning when I was talking to a friend years later that “gaymers” were indeed a thing. He mentioned a group he was a part of, the Phoenix Gaymers. I was intrigued and, by chance, they were hosting their main, monthly party that weekend. I was intimidated but my friend told me that he would be there and could show me around to help me feel comfortable. After touring around the facility, I decided to return to the video game room to play *Super Smash Bros. for Wii U* and, despite staying for the entire four hours of the party, I felt myself open up more than I ever had at any other LGBTQ-based event. Compared to just simply walking around

aimlessly without saying a word to anyone and without having anyone acknowledge me in a regular LGBTQ event, I felt a sense of belonging here. This was when I started to learn about what it really meant to be a gaymer.

As “Arizona’s largest gay gaming group” (Russ, 2013, para. 1), Phoenix Gaymers has been around since 2006 to provide “a safe and fun environment for the LGBT[Q] Community and Friends to come together, have fun, play games, socialize, and generally support each other.” (Phoenix Gaymers, n.d.). As a member and non-frequent participant in the Phoenix Gaymers’ events, I am especially interested in this organization as a space that provides the closest LGBTQ community that I can identify the most with. In my previous experiences with the group and participating in their largest event, their monthly gaymer party, I grew intrigued by how people reacted to the group and played against each other in *Super Smash Bros. for Wii U* or in board and trading card games. I found myself veering towards the Wii U group yet, in exploring this space as a researcher, I began wandering to other groups of gaymers and began to realize that the same people would go to these events. I wondered how an outsider could come to form relationships within these groups and spaces. To say that there are similarities and differences with the group dynamics is a superficial observation when there are more issues at work here - issues which, in this study, I explore and problematize in order to then define what I call “gaymer privilege.”

What this study aims to do is analyze how interactions within gaymer communities regulate and encourage the performativity of identity; I also seek to understand how gamers perform identity, especially how LGBTQ individuals perform identities within and outside of LGBTQ, gaming, and gayming communities. Finally, I

explore how gaymer communities could become even more inclusive of underrepresented communities (e.g., queer people of color, trans gaymers, female gaymers).

To begin this adventure, I first provide an overview of the literature that focuses on gamer communities – both in-person as well as online gaming communities – and that gives a general overview of gamer communities. Next, I will provide discussion on the interactions between gamers in relation to race, gender, and sexuality. I will then utilize hooks’s (n.d.) discussion on patriarchy as a theoretical framework which describes the issues that this project will look at while providing an overview of semiotic phenomenology as a method of inquiry.

Control Options: Gamer and Gaymer Communities

Gamer communities provide a form of entertainment, socialization, and different aspects of team/group building. As Hayes and Gee (2010) mention, gamer communities allow individuals to work together to accomplish a common goal through a mission or task. They also note that, while it can still be used “strategically” (p. 188), gender, sex, and sexuality are often an afterthought in gaming. However, while I find this to be true to the extent that skills and comradery are often key to growing and maintaining a gaming community, I also conclude that there are serious repercussions to not addressing the experiences of queer, non-cis male, and nonwhite gamers in gaming. To describe this phenomenon I provide a brief but general overview of the larger gamer community and then narrow the scope to specific areas within the community. This literature review will describe scholarship that analyzed the experiences of gamers in gaming communities for people of color, female gamers, and LGBTQ gamers. I will then provide an overview of the current literature, describing the issues of sexism, homophobia, and racism that are

found in gamer communities, as well as where the studies fall short. From here I will then discuss what my study hopes to accomplish to help build upon and address the limitations of the literature that exists.

Perhaps the best way to describe the gaming community, in its utopian state, is to look at Hayes and Gee's (2010) description of the community as an affinity space. They indicate that the gaming community - as an affinity space - becomes an area where people can come together to fight for a common goal, mission or cause. They also argue that an effective leader (e.g., guild leader) is one who mentors and sets an example for other players for efficient community building. Finally, they state that, regardless of experience, anyone can become a leader and that identity is only an afterthought. While all features are important to take into consideration, for the sake of this study, and for this review of literature, I will primarily focus on problematizing one statement that Hayes and Gee (2010) that downplays the importance of positionality within affinity spaces such as gaming communities. They state:

People relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability, or social class. These latter variables are backgrounded, though they can be used (or not) strategically by people if and when they choose to use them for their own purposes (Hayes & Gee, 2010, p. 188)

I find this component to be problematic because it attempts to privilege and whitewash (among other things) what happens in the gaming community and also because it implies that people who bring identity into gaming become the problem for the community. In the literature review that follows I focus on scholarly analyses of gender, sexuality, and

race in the gaming community in an attempt to further problematize the Hayes and Gee's assumption that gender, sexuality, and race are relatively unimportant aspects of gaming communities as affinity spaces.

While it may be true that people relate to one another "in terms of common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices..." (p. 188), especially in gaming where people need to work together to accomplish a common goal, this becomes complicated and muddled when a gamer's personal values are called into question by other gamers. A player could be insulted or penalized for choosing not to hide their identity. On the flipside, if nothing is said, then the possibility for the use of homophobic, sexist or transphobic language remains. The idea that minorities can treat their identities as an afterthought so they can share the same opportunities as others creates a conundrum for minority players and places them in a lose-lose situation that could become violent.

The idea that one's identity can be used "strategically by people if and when they choose to use...them for their own purpose" (p. 188) becomes a problematic statement. To use identity as strategic positioning implies that one can choose not to be a part of the community they are in. While one may select an avatar of a different race, sex, skin color, etc. in a virtual world, this does not mean that you can cast off your reactions to discrimination against your real self, something which Hayes and Gee (2010) disregard in making this statement which creates privilege and ultimately shuns the experiences and issues that one finds in race, gender, social class, sexuality, and others. Likewise, while Hayes and Gee (2010) also mention that affinity spaces can be found in face-to-face gaming, one's identity is always present in that space. On the other hand, the particular statement "for their own *purpose*" (p. 188, *emphasis mine*) implies that to disclose one's

identity is a political move that does not add to the gaming community. This is a problematic form of thinking because it suggests that those who do not follow the larger white, heterosexual, often hypermasculine, cis male-dominated field of gaming are a problem within the gaming community.

I take the time to unpack this component primarily because, while gaming communities offer an opportunity to socialize and come together to fight for a common cause, this also does not address what is happening deeper on a social level for those who, despite their best efforts in wanting to enjoy the game and the community itself, are unable to because of how they identify. Further, if one is part of a minority group but knows or feels as if the community is an unsafe space, then to simply suppress and ignore the issue of feeling attacked is not the way to go and will further continue a cycle of violence. Next, I will spend time looking specifically at the scholarship that looks at gender, sexuality, and race in gaming and gaming communities.

Gender and Gaming

Gender is perhaps what is most commonly looked at in scholarship regarding gaming. While the gaming industry is becoming more inclusive and mindful of female gamers, the gaming community has long been dominated and portrayed as a male pastime. As Shaw (2011) notes, the roles of female gamers and what constitutes as a gamer identity is very different from a male gamer as a result of how boys and girls are socialized at a young age. Shaw (2011) continues that a woman would have a harder time identifying as a gamer due to the lack of practice or playtime, especially in comparison to their male counterparts, regardless of their skill. This can be seen even within certain female Let's Players – gamers who record themselves playing a game – who are

apologetic in their “poor” play style (Omori, *forthcoming*). Some may brush it off with a joke or make it a semi-point of conversation, e.g., in a co-operative Let's Play, a male gamer comments on his wife having struggled at certain points of the game (Omori, *forthcoming*). There is a certain tone that is still present for female gamers where, despite having their career and income centered around playing video games – and playing them well enough to accrue a fanbase and revenue – are still regarded as not being good enough by men in the community.

Nakamura (2012) further critiques the idea that a female gamer as a representative and spokesperson receives resistance from the hypermasculine, male-dominated gaming community. She discusses the problems that Aisha Tyler faced as she emceed Ubisoft's E3 event where she was ridiculed for being an outsider despite the fact that she was, in fact, a gamer herself. Unfortunately, this is only one of many incidents where female gamers are not taken seriously. As Salter and Blodgett (2012) note, within nerd culture - which often extends to video games - some do not take women's issues seriously. They give as example that *Penny Arcade*, a webcomic that talks about gaming culture, creates merchandise of "Dickwolves" which does not take into consideration issues of domestic violence towards women and carries implications of rape culture. Those who voiced concerns were met with apathy from the *Penny Arcade* creators who proceeded to mock the boycotts against their merchandise and work. Feminist scholarship has begun to unpack and discuss what is happening in the gaming community, especially due to the continuing shift of broadening gaming to a wider audience. As Consalvo (2012) notes, for feminist scholars, a continued documentation of how the gaming community is resistant to the change for more inclusivity is needed. Her insights bring up a valid point

that the gaming industry is allowing heterosexual male gamers to feel entitled to their space, due to the use of selling their products with the use of sexually provocative, and nearly pornographic, materials (Consalvo, 2012).

As gender is and always has been an area of contestation, I find that the discussion of this form of scholarship is also limited. While scholars have looked at female gamer experiences, there is minimal discussion on transgender or genderqueer gamers. As Shaw (2011) seems to imply, transgender/genderqueer gamers hesitate to embrace the gamer identity, doubting that their abilities or time spent playing games are sufficient to truly be considered gamers. In this sense, more studies that especially focus on the experiences of trans gamers is important to consider within this study.

Sexuality and Gaming

Along with gender, studies in sexuality in gaming communities have been growing in disrupting the hypermasculine, straight, male-dominated narrative. Paul, Clements, Conn, and Jones (2014) indicate that the idea that one puts their identity aside for the sake of the objective and common cause is not necessarily true. Rather, as many of their interviewees indicate, being a gay individual who likes to game provides them with a sense of homophobia and sexism within the gamer community. Likewise, there is a feeling of having to monitor and police one's self into performing their sexuality in a certain way (Paul, Clements, Conn & Jones, 2014). While there have been gaymer conventions and a slight increase in LGBTQ representation in video games like other spaces within entertainment, there has been resistance towards these inclusions within gaming and gamer communities. However, LGBTQ and gaming conventions, like Gaymerx, focus on providing a safe (and fun) space for gamers and gaymers of all

identities to talk about queer issues in gaming or game development. Likewise, in recent years, The Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon) was established to bring together academics, gamers, and activists to discuss the issues and intersections of LGBTQ issues and games, as well as the intersectionality of race, class, and gender with sexuality (Ruberg, 2015). In studying gaymer communities, then, we must look at how identity is performed through the mundane interactions gaymers have with one another.

Race and Gaming

A downside to the current literature in the gaming community is the lack of discussion on race. While scholars may have attempted to tackle and focus more on race and gaming (Nakamura, 2012; Shaw, 2011), often the discussion of race becomes reduced to an afterthought. Though Nakamura (2012) helps us to look at the gamer community outside of the realm of MMO gaming, and more into the real-world gaming community, her discussion falls short, seemingly resorting to a typical scholarly answer in that a woman of color needing to prove herself in a white man's world, by concluding that in order to be seen as a proper gamer, a woman – especially a woman of color – has to work harder than a white man to be seen as a figurehead. Shaw (2011), unfortunately, fairs no better in her discussion of race among gamers, as her interviewees state that the lack of racial representation has never been a problem for them. What scholars fail to take into consideration is the cultural borders that many games cross over. The fact that some popular game titles may have perceived white characters were designed in another country (e.g., Japan) makes the argument that Shaw (2011) is trying to make complicated. Likewise, as Thornham (2011) tries to bring up with her participants in regards to the characters in *Final Fantasy X* (noted incorrectly as XII) looking white, she

does not take into consideration – likely not knowing – that character models were created by Japanese actors for the computer generated imagery (CGI) cutscenes in the game. In this sense, we simply cannot make the usual assumptions of whiteness through the Western-centric lens. We must take into consideration that racial issues and perceptions are different from country to country and, while MMO gaming is expanding to include a global audience and avatar creation is becoming more racially and gender inclusive, there is still a performative aspect in identity that makes gaming more real.

Race is still a contested space which has not been given much attention by scholars or by the community itself. In regards to race, perhaps it is the fact that the Japanese (specifically, influential Japanese gaming figureheads like Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto or Square Enix's CEO, Yosuke Matsuda) still have a strong presence in gaming through E3 conferences or within the games themselves that makes the discussion on the (in)visibility of race harder to describe and see. As Cheong and Gray (2011) state, the "power structure of the gaming industry [is] predominantly white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominant elite" (p. 268). They continue by discussing how virtual worlds reinforce certain cultural stereotypes that further marginalize minority populations. This project aims to look at the (in)visibility of race within gaymer communities who presumably have more consciousness towards issues and experiences of marginalization.

As I attempted to argue in this review of literature, the gaming community is not as utopian as Hayes and Gee (2010) imply. When one begins to critically analyze the experiences of female, LGBTQ, and racial minority gamers, the structures of the larger gamer community is littered with hypermasculine, heterosexual, cis male, and often white

privilege. In studying the gaymer community, I look on in hopes that this community will become more open to including gamers who are not just gay-identified but who are conscious of the racial and gender tensions found within the gamer community. However, to further analyze and propose how to best approach what is going on further, I move on to hook's (n.d.) discussion on patriarchy.

World Overview to Player Interactions

I have problematized the gaming community by showing that it is littered with privilege for heterosexual cis men who are often white or Asian (Cheong & Gray, 2011). Patriarchy, as hooks (n.d.) explains, is:

[A] political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (p. 1)

Particularly within the gamer community, then, this can be expanded to include not just women but to those who may put into question or challenge the hypermasculine narrative that has been instilled into the community. This is further elaborated by hooks's (n.d.) description of gender performativity. She problematizes that it is not so much that to bring down patriarchy is to bring down men, as many antifeminists may think, but, rather, to bring down hypermasculinity that puts down not just women but men who may be deemed "weak" or "non-masculine."

hooks (n.d.) discusses patriarchy as "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy." What this stands for is not so much the overt ways that systemic oppression is overtly practiced - as hooks mentions, "if we were to go door-to-door and ask if we

should end male violence against women, most people will give their unequivocal support” - but, rather, what the more problematic foundational oppressions that allow the systems of our society to function. She critiques this form of patriarchy as the structures of our society that we must address, and it is much more difficult for some to support. All three, imperialism, white-supremacy, and capitalism, have forms of hypermasculinity that serves to dominate and overpower those who are deemed weaker or inferior. In this regard, criticisms of cis male gamers in numerous gaming communities stating that they want their games to be about fun and not about real world politics are unknowingly still enforcing real world politics through the lens of privilege.

While hooks’s (n.d.) essay on patriarchy focuses on gender – especially cis male privilege – Lorde (2007) also expands on patriarchy to include race and sexuality alongside gender. As she critiques in academic circles in conversations on feminism, often race, class, and sexuality are left out of the conversation. The experiences of oppression by patriarchy of a poor black woman will be different from those of a poor white woman just as a lesbian black woman would face different struggles from a lesbian white woman. One who has experienced oppression by the patriarchy would know that it looks, feels, and is embodied differently by different minority groups.

Though patriarchy can in theory be discussed critically, the acknowledgment and experience of more nuanced patriarchy and oppression is often complicated and difficult to see in the moment. While it is one thing to experience blatant oppression, more systemic oppression is often muddled in fleeting moments of the mundane. Although it has already been established by current scholarship that the gamer community is gendered, sexist, homophobic, and racist, this study will analyze the gaymer community

to describe what phenomena of oppression are at play and exactly how they are being played out. In my next section, I will describe how semiotic phenomenology can work to flesh out and describe what is going on in the moment of experience. It is through this section that I hope to describe how I will unpack key themes that are always happening but that are not necessarily necessarily visible at first glance.

Gaymer Experience: Lived Experience and the Personal

I have spent a considerable amount of time discussing the current literature of gamer communities and the issues that are not only found within the community but within the scholarship itself. I argue that there is a greater need for scholarship that focus on the gamer community that go beyond the gender binary, more formal academic study on LGBTQ gamers, and a more explicit discussion of race and gaming. I spent time discussing that, theoretically, patriarchy is considered to be a dominant issue throughout the gamer community. In the same breath, however, I noted that the gaymer community was also a reaction to the patriarchal issues found within the larger gamer community. While I may have finally found a home within the LGBTQ community, I am hesitant to be optimistic of who actually gets to be included within the gaymer community. In this sense, I am interested in gaymers' experiences that led them to join the Phoenix Gaymers as well as what sorts of experiences they have had in interacting with other gaymers.

To look at these experiences, I will utilize semiotic phenomenology in attending the site and experience while using personal narrative as a form of storytelling and as a way to describe the phenomena that are being experienced. Semiotic phenomenology is about lived experiences; it is to bring in what was once "experienced" into the moment of "experiencing." While other qualitative methodologies situate experience in the past,

semiotic phenomenology locates experience as close to the present moment as possible, which, considering that an experience can never be experienced the same way by the same person, one cannot describe the experience to the analyst exact precision, and so there is difficulty in placing what is being looked at in the present moment. For this section, I will provide a general overview of semiotic phenomenology and then provide discussion on and break down the three steps followed in semiotic phenomenology: Description, Reduction, and Interpretation.

Semiotic Phenomenology

Semiotic phenomenology builds together both the theoretical and methodological foundations of “semiotics” and “phenomenology.” While transdisciplinary in nature, within the realm of communication, semiotic phenomenology provides both a “philosophical orientation and a logic of embodiment that establishes the fact and presence of human consciousness as it is situated within the concrete reality of other human consciousness and a physical environment” (Martinez, 2011, p. 97). In this sense, we are interested in bringing the subconscious into the forefront while keeping in mind the particular time and situation in which what happened occurred. However, what makes semiotic phenomenology different from other forms of qualitative inquiry – which Martinez (2011) argues still follow a positivist paradigm – is that it looks at an individual as both “a particular person and as interconnected with other people within the structures and signifying systems” (p. 98). From a semiotic standpoint, it is crucial for us to realize that the individual, the context/environment, and others around are all conveying sign and sign-systems, or forms of both verbal and nonverbal language, as well as different processes of meaning. Phenomenologically, this becomes a crucial starting point to not

just look at language as an object of study, but as the means by which one studies the embodiment of language in the context around us. Furthermore, this becomes a point for us to dive into the lived experience of the phenomena we are studying.

While semiotic phenomenology theoretically provides a different approach to qualitative inquiry, the *doing* of semiotic phenomenology is simple on paper but complex in practice. The process of doing semiotic phenomenology has three specific steps: Description, Reduction, and Interpretation. While it is important to keep these steps in mind, methodologically, it is also a recursive method that involves doing all three steps simultaneously within each specific step. What should happen, as a result of “invoking the epoché” or “bracketing,” is to attend to the phenomena as it appears, shifting what was experienced into the moment of experiencing what the experiencer experiences. An immediate example of what this means is to look at the gaymer community and the experience of in/exclusivity. One already knows there are patriarchal issues found in the larger gamer and LGBTQ communities; likewise, while one is already aware that there are inevitable patriarchal issues within gaymer communities, I am not so much concerned about those issues as much as what happens and how that forms from the experience itself. In other words, rather than asking question of “Why is there in/exclusivity?” I am more interested in the “What/How in/exclusivity is happening [and therefore is embodied in our experience]?”

Phenomenological Description

Once I am able to bracket our presuppositions, I can begin with the first step of semiotic phenomenology. Within the Description phase, one is aware of the temporality of extracting experience as it happens. In order for us to get the phenomenological

description, I follow Ihde's (1997) four operational rules in approaching my interviews and writing out my descriptions. I attempt to:

- 1) "Attend the phenomena of experience as it appears" (p. 34).
- 2) "Describe, don't explain.... To describe phenomena phenomenologically, rather than explain them, amounts to selecting a domain for inclusion and a domain for exclusion... one must carefully delimit the field of experience in such a way that the focus is on describable experience as it shows itself" (pp. 34-35).
- 3) "Horizontalize or equalize all immediate phenomena. Negatively put, do not assume an initial hierarchy of 'realities'" (p. 36).
- 4) "Seek out structural or invariant features of the phenomena" (p. 39).

To break each step down further, it is important to write out and attend to the experience as it appears in the moment. Writing in the present tense, rather than the past tense, is important for us to look at the experience as it is happening. From here, it is important to describe the phenomena, rather than explain. That is not to say that some forms of explanation are not important in moving the experience along, but I am interested in attending to the experience as it appears which will be important in moving along through the Reduction and Interpretation stages, as we continue to revisit the phenomena throughout. It is also important for us to horizontalize, or to equalize what is happening in the experience, in order to not impose our own biases and assumptions. While it may seem counter-intuitive or impossible to not be biased in the experience for a critical – or even qualitative – method, it is important to be mindful that one is already aware of the issues at hand but that, for the moment of the experience, the issues have

been bracketed. What is important for us to look at instead are key phrases, words, or certain contextual elements described within the experience. From there we can ask the interviewee for further elaboration to help paint a picture for us to walk through the experience as it is happening.

In preparation for recruiting and interviewing my participants, I crafted my interview questions to be guiding questions that were, for simplicity's sake, thematicized to cover four main areas: 1) The gaymer's experience in coming to the Phoenix Gaymers; 2) Their experience within the larger gamer community; 3) Their experience with the larger LGBTQ community; and 4) Their experience with the Phoenix Gaymers, both in-person and through their social media sites. While the overarching purpose of the interview was to look at ways in which the interviewee or others they have witnessed were either included or excluded within the gaymer community, I allowed the conversation to flow in the direction it went naturally. In doing this, I would bracket my own notions of gamer and gaymer communities and allow for "imaginative free variation," or to allow one to experience what one may experience, within the experience itself. This brings us to the second phase of semiotic phenomenology.

Phenomenological Reduction

I have gathered my interview data from my participants, and I have written them out to attend to the phenomena as close to the present as possible while trying to focus on description rather than explanation in the phenomena. At this point, I turn to the second step of semiotic phenomenology: Phenomenological Reduction. This step requires us to look at the phenomenological descriptions that were created to pick out common phrases, words, or key themes that may be pertinent to the experiences described. Through this,

there are two important steps involved: Imaginative Free Variation (IFV), which I have briefly described, and attention to “revelatory phrases.”

While I should note that both IFV and “revelatory phrases” work side by side with one another, IFV is more concerned with the process in which one “shift[s] aspects of our descriptions by focusing on the noesis (modality of experiencing)...within which the noema (the what of our experience) emerges” (Martinez, 2011, pp. 109-110). In this sense, IFV works to shift our way of reading and analyzing our descriptions from *what* was experienced, into the *how* of experience. In a personal example of experiencing exclusion, recall my experience at the beginning of the chapter where I was feeling miserable and wishing that I could move back to California. I found solidarity in the MMORPG, *Final Fantasy XI*, where I made friends. As I was bullied in school and began to realize that I was different from my heterosexual classmates, I began to turn towards the game even more. As I began voice chatting with my “female” gamer friends, I was shocked to learn that they were male gamers with female avatars. I can shift my analysis from *what* was described here in feeling excluded, and begin to move towards *how* exclusion happened.

In the emergence of “revelatory phrases,” I begin to unpack what was said in the experience and begin to pick up on *how* this description was exclusive. Likely, in my description of exclusion, there were several phrases and words that would indicate that I was feeling excluded. One could say I was miserable because of where I was living and feeling homesick for California. It probably did not help that, in the process of establishing myself in this new environment, I experienced bullying. Likewise, one can say that I was not accepting of calling where I lived “home” because I was reserved and

guarded, likely due to having realized that I was different from my straight peers. While I found myself to be different from others, there was a bit of solidarity that I found in *Final Fantasy XI* where I felt I could be “normal” because I had female friends who I felt comfortable flirting with. That allowed me to let my guard down, yet when I learned that they were also male gamers, I felt betrayed.

What I hoped to display here is not just an application of Phenomenological Reduction, but also how my reduction can be looked at in other ways. While I chose to dive deeper into the theme of “Feeling homesick,” also present are the possible themes of “Feeling betrayed,” “Wanting to be ‘Normal,’” and many more. In beginning to thematicize my description, I begin to lay the groundwork for the third phase, Phenomenological Interpretation.

Phenomenological Interpretation

Phenomenological interpretation, while seen as the “result” of phenomenology, is also perceived differently from what one may think of as a “result.” What phenomenological interpretation aims to do is “discover the essential or invariant structures of a phenomenon which make it possible for it to have appeared (and become experiences by a person) in the way that it did” (Martinez, 2011, pp. 110-111). Recall the two essential steps within Phenomenological Reduction, IFV and “revelatory phrases.” There are reason and intentionality (more on this shortly) on what brings up these phrases that allow one to consider a number of themes within the descriptions that I received and created. What Phenomenological Interpretation aims to do is to provide discussion on the particular phenomenon that appears before us so I can create meaning from the description and reduction to better understand it. In doing so, I am aiming into the

phenomenological intentionality, which links one to the “culture, language, institutions, and other suprasocial semiotic structures (experience) in which we are all inextricably interconnected” (p. 111). In this sense, Phenomenological Interpretation also aims to bring what may initially be abstract into something that is more concrete so that one may better understand the experience.

By looking at the theme I created in the Phenomenological Reduction, “Feeling of Homesickness,” one can unravel the language and phrases used to begin the discussion on what is happening in my experience. One can understand that I had to deal with culture shock when I first moved to Texas. I became reclusive and devoted my time and energy towards *Final Fantasy XI* because of the solidarity that it brought me. In this sense, I experienced two forms of shock, where I was going through a negative adjustment in real life, yet on the flipside, my shock with *Final Fantasy XI* was made positive, having made friends and feeling “normal.”

I attempted to provide a brief theoretical discussion of semiotic phenomenology, and a general overview on the methodology of semiotic phenomenology. It is my hope that in each of the three steps, Description, Reduction, and Interpretation, I was able to display the groundwork from which I will position and approach this project. As we move on, I will provide a preview of each chapter before moving on to the Phenomenological Descriptions themselves.

A Quick Tutorial...: A Preview of What's to Come

Chapter 1 provides the background and need for my study, as well as the methodological procedures in gathering and analyzing data. The following chapters will provide an in-depth analysis of the process of doing semiotic phenomenology.

Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, I begin by applying the first phase of semiotic phenomenology through my descriptions. Each description will include basic demographic information for my interviewees, a brief description of our interactions, their interview, and my reflections on their interviews and my position with them.

Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, I move on to the second phase of semiotic phenomenology, reduction. Each experience will be looked at and will be used to find common themes built up from what was said in each interview. Themes focus on a particular tension that is within the experiences laid out. I hope to tease out further meaning through the data that is displayed.

Chapter 4

Finally, Chapter 4 moves on to the third and final phase in semiotic phenomenology, interpretation. This chapter focuses more on a discussion of the invariants found within the descriptions and themes to bring forth the issues that are prevalent throughout the span of experiences. It is also here that I will provide my concluding thoughts on what this project was able to accomplish and where both academic scholarship and the Phoenix Gaymers should move forward towards.

Chapter 2: Character Backgrounds: Experiences in Phenomenological Description

In Chapter 1, I provided an introduction to the literature used in gaming communities as well as a theoretical and methodological framework to work through this study with the Phoenix Gaymers. Chapter 2 will serve as the Phenomenological Description step in the framework of semiotic phenomenology. In the seven interviews I gathered through the Phoenix Gaymers, I have included the descriptions of three officers and four members, two of whom were cis male QPOC, one white cis female, one white trans female, one white genderflux trans male, and two white cis men. While I had guiding questions to help with bringing out their lived experiences, I also tried to allow for more free-form thought. Ten guiding questions were categorized thematically to cover four major areas:

- 1) How did you come into the Phoenix Gaymers?
- 2) What have your interactions been with the larger LGBTQ community?
- 3) What have your interactions been with the larger gamer community?
- 4) What have your interactions been with the gaymer community?

Each interview lasted from 25 minutes to 50 minutes and was audio recorded with the interviewee's permission. From there, I transcribed the interviews while adjusting some of the wording to allow for better flow without disrupting or changing the interviewee's voice. I then presented what I wrote to my interviewee to get confirmation that they were okay with it or if they had any questions or elaborations. Included with each interview, to help bracket my presuppositions, I also include my interactions with and reflections of that person.

Jeremy

Character Description: Asian/Hispanic, Queer, cis male

Story:

I remember having a conversation with a friend about finding the larger LGBTQ community here in the area to not be the kind of community that I identify or associate myself with. I was especially, and still am, cynical towards the community. He then told me about the Phoenix Gaymers organization here in Phoenix. I was curious and intrigued; I always wanted a gaymer boyfriend. We talked more about it and I agreed to go to one of their gaymer parties.

I remember going there and being a little early. I didn't see my friend and I began to feel awkward and out of place. I panicked and thought that this was a repeat with just about any and all social events I go to – especially LGBTQ ones. I decided to walk around the area to explore. It was an older building in the middle of Downtown Phoenix, but it had a certain community feel to it – something that I did not know how to feel, but I decided to stay open-minded to it. My friend arrived and asked if I had signed in yet. I responded that I hadn't and we signed in together at the front desk where he introduced me to one of the presidents of the group. He gave me a tour of the different areas which included a room filled with food and all the video game consoles. On the other side, with the library, there were trading card games being played, and finally another room with board games. He asked what I was interested in doing, and, feeling anxious, guarded, and slightly overwhelmed, I responded with my go-to answer in this state, “Um... I don't know? I guess I'll just watch *Smash Bros.*?” Patiently, he smiled and we walked back to the video game room.

He eventually went his own way to talk with others and I was left to do my own thing. Almost as my new security blanket, I stayed and watched people play *Super Smash Bros. for Wii U*. Eventually, I got enough courage to ask if I could join in, and I found myself playing the entire time. Near the end, I felt myself getting more comfortable within this space, but it was soon over. The co-president asked me how I was doing and what I thought, to which I responded that I was having a good time. It was certainly true, despite my awkward and overwhelmed feelings. Overall, I left feeling happy to have gone, despite not having interacted with others.

Another time, going to the Gaymer party, a conversation was brought up between a couple of the members and me. He mentioned how we were “extremely early.” I mentioned how I was early to help, but also that I was intimidated by driving in Downtown Phoenix, which he agreed. Another member, who arrived earlier than us stated, “The reason why I’m early is because I went to Rainbowfest but it was a snooze.” The first member responded, “Well... yeah, if you’re going alone, it’s boring, like Comic-Con.” The second member retorted, “Even with Comic-Con, you can strike up a conversation with someone.”

Later on, during the event, an older white man hung around the party. He stood out from the majority of the crowd. I am unsure of why he stood out, of why I felt uncomfortable. Was I falling into my notions of ageism? I was and still am very conscious of it. We talked a bit and he told me about Rainbowfest, and how he was waiting for a friend to drop by from the event. He recommended that I go to Rainbowfest if I hadn’t gone before and to go early to see all the younger guys. I smiled and politely chuckled, wondering about the stark opinions between his and the other member’s

experiences with Rainbowfest, and my own preconceived notions. Is it bad to feel this way? Maybe he was lonely, or maybe he was looking for some “hot, young ass,” and yet I think about my own reasons for going, and there are times where I find myself hoping to talk to a cute guy for something romantic or sexual. Am I any different?

Another time, sitting in my office, I received a text from a friend I had met in the Phoenix Gaymers. He told me that if I wanted to see some trolling on the Phoenix Gaymers Facebook page, I should check it out now before the officers took it down. While busy with other work, I was intrigued. I tried going through different posts and was not able to find the thread right away. Eventually I found the post and I read the subject and arguments: a debate on which console was better: the PlayStation 4 or the Xbox One. It was a typical debate question, worded to sound like a genuine question but which eventually became clear to be a loaded question. People posted and tried to respond with their thoughts and opinions, but the original poster shot them down, almost twisting their words. Eventually, the admins commented to be respectful of others’ opinions, to which the original poster seemingly to display his innocence, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just trying to get a clear answer.” I don’t agree completely with the hostility he gave out with his responses to others. I wonder if perhaps he was being misunderstood in his messages. Or was he truly a troll, wishing only to incite debate amongst others? I think back to the times where I was misunderstood by others, both in person and online. I remember when I tried being neutral in a subject, but my own biases got the best of me and made my so-called open-ended discussions into a debate when others did not see things as I did. I am trying to understand, but I am veering

towards the side that this is a troll, trying to get into a hostile debate, and I leave it as such.

Enigma

Character Description: White, genderflux trans man, demisexual and panromantic

Encounter:

I first interacted with Enigma on my first day of doing fieldwork. It was at the Main October Gaymer Party, where he and Erin, another gaymer, asked me if I wanted to play the deck-building game, *The Red Dragon Inn*. I had the game and wanted to play more so I accepted. There was a point in the game where another gaymer would address Enigma as “she” in which Erin would correct him, saying that Enigma is a “he.” I noticed that Erin and Enigma had their preferred pronouns written on their nametags. I stopped, I had never noticed that information on the nametags. From there, I began noticing that several people had their preferred pronoun stated.

Story:

Something that happened with Erin at one of the parties, someone said something really nasty to her. Someone got her attention and said, “Oh, I thought you were a girl. Why are there never any girls here?” It was a guy and it was really confusing. Like, why are you even asking that, and secondly, she is a girl and she’s wearing a skirt and a blouse and everything, so it was very, very obvious. So there shouldn’t have been an issue here, but there was. She talked to the leadership and told them what they could do to make things better, and they made a post on Facebook. It was a general post; a non-judgmental post without resorting to name-dropping. So, that is why more people and the leadership now indicate their preferred pronouns on their nametags.

When we went outside afterwards, there were people who just walked by and didn’t talk to us at all. I mean, I know they were heading home and it was fine if people

didn't say anything, but there are some people who really went out of their way to say goodbye to us, and that was really awesome. So, I mean, I feel like there is a place for us, but at the same time... I feel like it's harder for Erin, and not because she's trans, but because there's a higher male population, and I think she just wants to be a part of the gaymers and part of the crowd, but sometimes she feels a little left out. She's very sociable with talking online, but she is more shy when it comes to talking in person at first.

I'm very talkative and I think people just go along with the fact that I talk to them. But, I noticed that... I felt... I don't know if it's because I'm trans or anything but I feel like some people are more welcoming than others, but I don't know if it might be because they have their own cliques, but I'm never going to ascribe to malice. So, I'm just going to assume its clique-ishness with that. People naturally gravitate to groups and it's just a human thing.

Something interesting that happened on the Facebook page was that there was a realtor who posted sometimes. I remember responding to one of his posts, saying that I was looking for a roommate and for housing, but I never received a single contact. I mean, you would think they'd want to get on that, but I dunno... it might've just been a mispost or something. I just wrote it off as nothing happening or that no one was moving at the time. There was someone else who posted, but I think he was looking for something on the West side, but I just try and look for the best in people. So, it's a little discouraging, but even when I post on a huge Discord server for almost all trans people, I usually only get one response. So, you know, it happens.

Sometimes, I feel like the groups are a little bit clique-ish and that's the extent that I've had a negative experience. I mean, even amongst the *Magic* players, I noticed that certain groups gravitate to specific tables. I also noticed different body types – not weight or stuff like that, but gendered or sexed body types were in different places too. There seems to be more assigned female people hanging out in the backroom, as opposed to a lot of people who would generally be assumed to be guys hanging out in the front room, so it's a bit interesting. The only time I would really see people together is during the raffles, but even then there would be people hanging out in the back. I've gotten a couple sideways glances, and I don't know why, but I don't ever judge a person's motives by their facial expressions, I mean, I don't know what my own face is doing half the time! So it's been an overall good experience.

With the general gamer community, I find that I'm very much often mis-gendered. People will often try and teach me games that I already know and it's just annoying, which is why I don't go to game shops very often. That and being stared at. I do not like being stared at by large groups of people unless I'm up on stage singing. So, I generally game in small groups or online because of that. Online communities I find to be much more accepting, and it's more of a safe space, because you have moderators. Whereas if you go to a card shop, you only have the owners or the workers there to manage things. Normally, I don't want to bother with them when I can just leave. With the Gaymers, I felt more included and it was a safer place. While I'm still fairly nervous because this is all still fairly new to me, I feel like I can be more who I am and not get talked down to, and people will explain the games to me, if I needed to know, but

otherwise they will ask, “Have you played this game before?” instead of immediately jumping to, “I’m going to tell you the rules.”

I mean, I feel like when it’s with cis, hetero male gamers, anyone who’s not in a body like theirs needs to take advice from them. It’s a problem because it’s that whole “if you’re in that particular body, you have to prove that you’re a gamer,” and that’s a bigger problem with the gamer community at large. I mean, with my [cis male] fiancé, if he says that he likes Star Trek, no one is going to question him, yet for me, if I were to say I like Star Trek, then I’m going to get grilled on it, going into detail, as if to prove myself.

With the trans communities I’m a part of, mostly that’s online and I found that I get along with segments of the community, but there are others that I don’t. Like, most of the people are nice, but there’s this subset that some of the girls who are, for some odd reason, trollish and sort of really want the attention, and I can understand why. There is a specific room that is just for the guys and a lot of us hide out there because we don’t want to be in the open community as much because we’re made to feel invisible, unless we really, really put ourselves out there and it’s weird... I don’t know how to explain it. We have a presentation room where we can take selfies and show off and all that stuff, and there’s definitely a discrepancy between how the trans girls and the trans guys and even the non-binary people are responded to. The girls get tons and tons of compliments, the non-binary people get slightly less, and the guys get almost none, except from other guys. It’s weird that way, but that’s how it is. There’s a big problem in the trans community with the [online] server, imposed by itself in some ways, but in other ways, it’s not, and that’s with trans guys being invisible. This is due to when it came to guys transitioning, they would want to stop at the point where they would be perceived as a cis guy. And

then there's a problem in the community at large where a lot of trans guys are not the nicest people. They're obsessed to the point of wanting to be perceived as a cis guy to the point where they will take on these bad habits. So when you have someone like me who is okay with being okay and out with myself and being that slight bit of non-binary... I mean... there's a problem there. I'm a minority within a minority within a minority at that point. But at the same point, that's what pushed me to reach out to other people and to put myself into the conversations. One of the funny things that comes of this is that a lot of girls will actually come to me for makeup advice.

When I worked on the role-playing forum, I never really divulged my gender that much. I mean, I let anyone call me by whatever gender they wanted since I was genderfluid, so it didn't matter to me anyways. And some would call me "he," and some would call me "they," and others would call me "she," and I didn't want anyone to know what the actual truth was. I felt I got more respect for being this enigma.

I think that the Phoenix Gaymers is a safe space, and I understand that there's no such thing as a perfectly safe space. But what makes this space safe is that the majority of the community and its moderators are on board and willing to protect the people in the community, and not just from outsiders but from people who are already integrated, and make sure that people know that these are the rules we play by and this is what we're going to do. I like how they do it in a way where they're not calling anyone out, because that's a problem I had in other communities where if people are causing a problem, they get called out, and that's not cool. So, the way they handle things, like in the instance of the nametags and having people look at others' nametags as a way to include my friend's gender identity, is a good way to handle that.

I can never get a ride to the events. And I never get responses for rides to the gaymer events on the Facebook page. I don't know if it's because people don't know me or if I'm doing something wrong or if people aren't on this side of town. But, I know the latter part isn't true because they have events that happen on this side of town, so I'm just assuming people are just busy or they just don't have any room in their car. Even then... I don't know.

I would like to see more educational material on the Gaymer Facebook page or any of the other social media pages, not just to learn from one another, but also so we have resources available to share with our family. I remember when I came out to my dad, he refused to listen to anything that I said. And it was only through having help from the larger trans community I'm a part of that I knew how to handle things so it wouldn't become a bigger problem. Chances are, there are a lot of questioning kids – college kids – who could benefit from, if they are gaymers, having at least a list of definitions to go by. I would love to see stuff like that.

Reflections:

Enigma was my first interviewee and I was especially excited when he agreed to let me interview him. I remember being nervous and feeling like an impostor as this researcher who, at the time, didn't know what he was really doing, minus some vague, abstract idea of in/exclusion. I wonder if he sensed that? One of his first questions to me was, why interview him and not Erin? I remember debating this at some point, but I mentioned that he caught my eye because, at the time, when others would ask for something on the Phoenix Gaymers Facebook page, they would get responses, but when he asked for things, no one would say anything.

I remember at one point, after the interview was over, Enigma told me that he talked about this interview with his friends on the Discord server. He let me know that they all thought that this project and this interview were really cool. I paused briefly. I remember many things going through my head. I was surprised and humbled from hearing the comment, but I questioned myself and what I had to offer, and, ironic as it is, I questioned my authority to tell his story. But furthermore, even long after he left, I sat in the IHOP reflecting on what he said, and the interview, and how I felt a slight bond with him. I felt like I could relate to his story on some level - believing the good in others' intentions, feeling deliberately ignored in the LGBTQ community, wanting to do or go to events but being unable to - I left this interview realizing that there was worth in my study and that it no longer revolved around me.

Cuppa

Character Description: White, cis male, gay

Encounters:

I knew Cuppa mostly from the video game room and seeing him set things up before the monthly Gaymer Party. We would always make small talk but never really went beyond anything substantial. I will admit that while I helped out with setup and cleanup, when I began doing fieldnotes, I never thought he actually knew me by name. He is an officer for the Phoenix, Gaymers, but he is also the one gaymer that stood out to me as someone who socialized and played games alongside everyone the most.

Story:

I heard about the group about roughly 5 or 6 years ago. I've always been a gamer; I've always played video games and board games. But I never really knew any other gay people who play games as a majority of their life. I was dating someone in the group who told me about the Phoenix Gaymers. I was interested so I started following them on Facebook, but I lurked their Facebook page for about six months to a year before I finally decided to go to a meeting. I was super nervous and I drove up to the house, turned around and started heading home, but then I came back. I did that, like, three times before I got out of the car. Even then, I still didn't talk to anyone for the first 20 minutes or so, but it was really an interesting experience. All everyone was doing was playing video games and card games.

When the parties were at a person's house, we used to let them go way later than we do now. I remember one time, we were there until about 2am and the owner of the house had to kick us out because he wanted to go to bed. So it's nice that it's not at

somebody's residence because we're not imposing and the center pays people to clean up after us, so we don't have to worry about spending the next day cleaning up after everyone. But I always found that this has been an open and welcoming fun group and I had no idea what to expect. Like, maybe it would be a good way to meet people. I think I only had about two gay friends before I met the Gaymers. And now I have like hundreds of people on Facebook that I'm at least casually acquainted with.

Before, when it was at someone's house, we used to drink, but now that it's in a public space, we don't allow drinking. I know for a public space, like the ones where we host the main Gaymer party, it's to not let things get too wild and also because we don't really have much choice. But that's fine; we also want to be a bit of an open-to-all-ages kind of group, where if we don't have alcohol then we don't have to worry about it. We still do events at bars or restaurants that might have or serve alcohol, but at that point, it's the establishment regulating that instead of us. I think this is more of a mixed blessing because it's kind of nice to have an event where you don't have to worry about everyone being drunk. But then I can understand people wanting the social lubricant of alcohol.

It always feels weird for me, personally, but I feel like... and I guess this is my own personal baggage or whatever, but if I were to try and pursue someone in the group, romantically, and it doesn't go well, then it alienates them from the whole group because they see me as a member of the board of directors and so if things begin to get awkward then are they not going to want to be a part of the group? But I guess that's just a part of the reality of relationships with people in general. There were two people who I went out with. There was one where we went out but never talked about it again, so there just wasn't any kind of spark, but I still see him at events. I haven't seen this other guy in a

while, but I don't think it's because of what I talked about. But I haven't really dated anyone from the group, and that might just be me in general. I am also very clueless, so I usually just don't pick up on anything if people are actually interested. It might also just be a self-esteem issue too, where I never assume anybody is interested in me like that, so I never do it.

It might just be that I don't interact that much and that I'm just observing, and I know our group has been accused of being too clique-ish, but it seems like it's just the same group of people meeting each other and going to whatever bar... but that's the other thing about the gay community here: all the social events are at bars or dance clubs or places that serve alcohol, and I understand those kinds of people who like to hang out at those kinds of places and those places being fun, but what if people don't want to drink or don't want to be in this packed room full of sweaty people grinding on each other?... I don't know, maybe clique-ish is too unfair, but that's what it seems to me, looking in.

There are definitely regular groups of people who show up to events together or are friends with people who aren't in the group, and I don't know if I noticed it being too exclusionary in the group. I try to shut that down right away and tell them, "Hey come on now, we're all friends here," but I had that criticism from somebody who wasn't in the group once, when I asked somebody on some app. They felt like the group was too RSVP clique-ish, and I don't know if they said that, even though they never tried to be a part of the group or go to an event.

I haven't really interacted with the larger LGBTQ community too much, because I haven't really been a part of any LGBTQ-related group. I know a few people from work because they have diversity groups that you can join and be a part of their events groups

that you can help with. I have gone to Pride Parade and Rainbowfest, but that's all been through the Gaymers. I find that a lot of the community here is really fragmented, and that there are a lot of cliques that meet together and talk crap about each other or don't associate with each other, and I find that kind of sad. I'm hoping that our group is a good example of how to reach out to other groups and how to work with one another. We try to keep our parties open and try not to exclude others. But we are seen as a kind of boy's club because, and this might not be true but, gaming is seen as more of a boy/man activity, and we try to keep this open and we have girls who play video games or card games. I mean, it's a sub-group within a sub-group within a sub-group, for girls who play games but then identify as being queer, and then there's just no crossover at all. It's hard, but unless more girl gamers show up then it'll remain the same, but then you don't want to be the only girl to show up there, and I can totally understand that because that'll be awkward.

So far, the friends that I've made in the Gaymers haven't been very different from people who I've known since high school. I guess it's slightly different because you can kind of connect on a subconscious level with someone who has similar life experiences. So, like hey, you identify as queer and you like to game, and you probably, like me, have been on Xbox Live and you've heard some very incendiary words, because people are playing shooters and things get heated, and sometimes they don't mean it, but because they're so angry... I dunno, it's nice to be with people who have similar experiences and enjoy similar subjects. When I first met our Community Liaison, it was at a Gaymer Meetup and somehow the topic of the video game *Dragon Age* came up and suddenly, boom! We were instant friends. We had so much to talk about because I can talk about

that game for hours and hours. Both she and her girlfriend were there talking about how they love *Dragon Age*, the franchise, and we talked about certain characters where, “Oh! I hate that character so much because when they...!” and it’s like, “Oh my god! We have so much in common!!” so it’s great...

I always try to get gamers and gaymers to co-mingle. I’ve had friends that I’ve met or have known since high school that I’ve invited to a gaymer event, even though they don’t identify as queer. Because it’s something that I always try when reaching out to groups... it becomes a weird double-edged sword, the word “gaymer” has “gay” in it, so that’s why we can be seen as a boy’s club because it sounds like we’re a group of gay male gamers. Since, when you say the word “gay” you typically assume a gay male, instead of a gay female or anyone in the queer community. But the word is so search-engine optimized! But I have had straight friends come to gaymer events and they had fun; they haven’t come back, but I don’t think it’s because of the group, but because of their schedules. But I’m always reaching out to friends; I try to tell them, “Hey, you don’t have to be gay to be a gaymer” because if we didn’t allow straight people into the group, then we would be a tiny bit hypocritical. It’s something that I said to different people, that, “Well, you’re straight, so you can’t be in our group” is kind of the opposite of the point of the group.

It’s hard to say how another group would experience something. I mean, you can’t speak for someone, say, trans or bisexual. But we try to keep the group as inclusionary as possible; we try to keep people from saying things about other groups that they’re not necessarily a part of or try not to give in to stereotypes. I mean, hey, we’re all here to play games. It doesn’t matter who someone feels romantically towards or sexually

towards, or not at all, and we want to feel open. We're not, and sometimes people might see us as a dating group just because that seems to be like a connotation that if you're a gay group, you do stuff, well... like we've been accused of having orgies. Because that's what everyone assumes, when gay people meet and stuff. So trying to be inclusionary of everyone like when we take photos of the events or market events, we're trying not to say, "Hey, here's a bunch of photos with a bunch of white guys" and we want to be welcoming towards others... I dunno. I dunno how to say it. It's a touchy subject for someone who isn't a part of some of these oppressed or looked down upon or more stereotyped groups, because it's easy for me to say we want to be open to everybody, but obviously being a white cis male person, you stand on this plateau of "Everything is fine up here!" when yeah, maybe in my experiences, but... at least the more that I speak to other people, the more conscious I become of things like that. So... I guess if the group being exclusionary is something that is a problem, I just don't know if that is something that I have the answer to because if you feel like you're just reaching out to one group, then you run the risk of making yourself look good.

We try to keep posts on the Facebook page relevant to the group. Sometimes, someone might post something, like that they're looking for a roommate, which is fine, since we're a social group. But we try to stay away from political posts, even if the group might lean one particular way over the other because that's not what the group's about. We might support causes and charities and stuff, but we want to keep... we want to prevent people from hating each other over one things that someone might disagree about despite having all these common grounds.

On the Facebook page, we've had problem people who trolled members of the board or continually post things, get warned, and post things, and complain that we didn't take a certain post down. We had somebody for the longest time get mad if anybody posted pictures that had... not nudity per se, but pictures of shirtless men who were in shape. So, that didn't violate the Facebook guidelines, and while I can understand you not wanting to see that, but it seemed... and, well, I won't be armchair psychologist but I think this person had body image issues on themselves. But then this person would post things with words that I wouldn't want posted on a page, like the F-word – not the “f-u” word, but the “f-a” F-word.

We had someone show up to our party once and, from what we found out from mutual people we knew, we found out that this person just broke up with somebody else who was in the group and he was obviously very sad about it. So we tried to talk to that person, but not in a way that's like, “Oh hey! Everybody is talking behind your back!” but like “Hey, is everything okay? Do you want to talk about anything? Or do you want to play a game and not talk about anything? We can do that.”

It really just depends on what people want to get out of the group. I dunno, I always just say, “You get what you put in.” If you show up to an event and don't talk to anybody, then, with exceptions, not many people are going to talk to you. It's really your attitude, and I understand showing up and being nervous and not wanting to talk to the group because I used to be, and I still am, a shy person and it's hard for me to initiate conversations with people. This group has really gotten me out of my shell, and it probably helps, too, that I'm helping out on the board. I guess knowing that, because I'm

on the board, I'm seen like a representative of the group - and it's weird for me to say - but I feel like I have this responsibility to talk to somebody.

Reflection:

Similar to Enigma, I found myself relating to Cuppa in several ways. We came into the Phoenix Gaymers with the same emotions and the organization helped to open us up to others. While he situated himself as an officer, I situated myself as a researcher. We both had the same idea that, in order to perform our roles effectively, we had to socialize and interact with others to get to know people and let people know we were there to be reached out to. I wanted to get to know Cuppa's experiences more because of how sociable he is. His remarks on outreaching more diverse bodies stood out to me. I felt myself coming back to Enigma's comments about his Discord server being grateful for my study, and that tension between representing them and speaking for them. I don't have an easy answer for that, nor would I say I even have an answer to give. I felt myself becoming self-conscious of my role and of being an imposter. Yet, at the same time, I felt myself moving forward and getting a better idea of what this project was and I felt relief that this is not just a project for me.

Magic

Character Description: White, gay, cis man

Encounters:

I met Magic my first day of fieldwork with the Phoenix Gaymers at their main Gaymer Party in October. I was extremely early and the sort of authority he had about him, bringing food and drinks, I assumed he was an officer. I would only later find out that he was just a very devoted member for the organization. Similar to Cuppa, I did not interact with him much, yet he remembered me and we exchanged numbers to talk. He would be one of the first gaymers that I would tell that I was doing a study on how gaymer communities were inclusive and exclusive, and he was impressed. He volunteered himself to be interviewed, which I eventually took him up on.

Story:

My experience with the Phoenix Gaymers has been one of the most positive experiences I've had, in terms of opening me up to socializing with other people. One of the Catch-22's for being a "gaymer" is that gay people, in general, have a hard time meeting like-minded people and have anxiety about surroundings or feeling relaxed. For nerds/gaymers, that's then compounded because, as you know, the majority of nerds tend to not necessarily be all that good at the whole social/party thing. So... for me, before I began hanging out with the Phoenix Gaymers group, I had maybe two or three friends, tops, who I could relate to as being nerds and gay.

It's interesting seeing how the *Magic* card game group is because it gives you a facet of the whole subcategory within a subcategory within a subcategory... that endless rabbit hole. There's the gay gamers, and then the game groomer subtext. The group that

meets on Friday are pretty much all *Magic* card players, so you have a collection of people who are just the *Magic* card players, and interestingly enough, because a lot of them are mostly all about playing *Magic* cards rather than the gamer thing, they actually don't necessarily go to the Gaymer parties much anymore because their thing is with playing *Magic* cards. So they will go to the weekly Friday and Sunday night events. It's a fairly good group; the Sunday group is more open-ended to other groups. I will say that, for the most part, because it's an unofficial event, it gives them a more relaxed environment, in terms of being with other gay people who are gamers, but it's not an official Gaymer event.

The only times I really only participated in the larger LGBTQ communities was once a year at Pride, where, with the Phoenix Gaymers, we would get together and march in the Pride Parade, and occasionally go to Pride and hang out a bit. So in general, the type people who will get together at the Phoenix Gaymers are the type of people who you wouldn't typically find at a bar or dance club or doing the stereotypical "gay stuff."

It's no surprise that the gay community is fractured into countless sub-categories. There are the very effeminate gays, there are the masculine gays, there are the very fashion trending gays, and for each individual subgroup, if you have that feeling and urge to be active to volunteer to be in the community, you have to find that community that fits your own personality and subtype. So as the gay nerd/gaymer-type person, fitting myself within the nerd/gay community, I feel like I can then give that energy.

Well... I'm not proud to say that I started the subgroup of gaymers for *Magic: The Gathering* because I found playing *Magic* once a month at the Gaymer group to not be enough. I've been playing it for many years, once a month at the party, and I found

many other people who were enjoying playing Magic and wanted to get together on a more regular basis. At the time that I started it on Friday nights, my schedule was such where I got off work fairly early, and there's a comic book store that was fairly close to me where we could meet. Three other friends and I started it and we basically got it going from there. That was about two years ago and, since then, it has become a Friday and Sunday night event. And since it has become huge and since I am sort of the starter of it, I have tried to branch it out into a Sunday event, where I try to foster other types of games, like board games and other card game players like those who play *Pokémon* cards or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards, especially because it is an event that lasts much longer. Basically, I'm trying to foster a more inclusive experience rather than just a Magic card game experience.

I feel like being in the Gaymers, I can not only be active to make a difference but that it can also be fun. I mean, you always have people who have that voice in the back of their head saying, "Go out. Make a difference. Make the world a better place. Be active. Volunteer for stuff," but it's really hard to do stuff like that these days, especially when you have work and other things. But I find that, within the Gaymers, it's a lot easier because a lot of the things you're doing for volunteering, doesn't feel like volunteering, but more like hanging out with friends and a bunch of nerds.

One of the nice thing about the Phoenix Gaymers - and this is one of the things that I encourage other Gaymers to do - is that the Phoenix Gaymer Facebook page can often serve as a help page. Like, one time, I posted something on there when my friend was in the hospital. And he had no way of contacting any other friends and I posted

something on the page, signifying that - and I encouraged people in the past to do this - if there's something you are in dire need of, post it on the page, and you may get help.

I just want to say that, as a nonprofit group, man, it is hard to squeeze money out of people. For anybody listening out there, for putting together an already amazing event, once a month, trying to get a couple of dollars from folks at these events, nonprofits have it rough out there. It is a really great group, and I will say that they do a lot of good and giving donations for other people, but overall, again, I've been going here 12, 13, 14 years or so now... a very long time, and if the group wasn't around or if they just couldn't put on the events... I don't know if a lot of people here would have the outlets that they have here. You have people with social anxiety who don't get out of the house much, who don't have places to go to express themselves. There are not a whole lot of opportunities, aside from something like this.

Reflection:

Magic was eager and was very happy to describe his experiences with the Phoenix Gaymers. I honestly still wonder why it is that I feel like I did not get as deep a story as I should have. Compared to Enigma and Cuppa's stories, and even with my own story, to an extent, I felt uneasy with the utopian narrative Magic gave. Though I try not to be critical, and to an extent, I agree that the Phoenix Gaymers is my gay community, there was something scripted about his thoughts. I remember, afterwards, he told me a tiny bit more history of the Phoenix Gaymers and he did mention that the early days of the group had a boy's club feel to it. Further, he mentioned that people made rumors that the group was a front for an orgy party. I was mortified by this rumor. Yet, as I looked around the Monthly Gaymer Party, the amount of female gaymers and trans gaymers was

significantly smaller than male gaymers. My original perceptions of being a gaymer were affected by that rumor in a way that made me reflect more on the negative stigmas of being considered a “gaymer.”

Wallace

Character Description: Native American, gay, cis male

Encounters:

Wallace was one of the first officers for the Phoenix Gaymers that I met. My friend actually introduced me to him, and while I tried being friendly, I was still very quiet and reserved. I remember, before leaving the main Gaymer Party, he asked me what I thought of the group and I gave a small reply that I really enjoyed it and would love to come back again. He was friendly, and I am grateful for him being welcoming. Similar to me, he seems quieter and works more behind the scenes, but tries to talk with everyone.

Story:

I started out in the Phoenix Gaymers group when it was through Meetup, but then I went into organizing when the organizer at that time moved out of the state. There were two groups that existed in the community. One was the one that one of the officers was involved with; it was more informal, meeting with friends. The group that I joined was one that started on Meetup.com, and that one was also called Phoenix Gaymers. After the person running the group left, the officer in the other group and I both decided to combine the two groups together. It didn't take much effort to combine them, it was more a matter of me giving the other officer access to the Meetup website, and him giving me access to the Facebook page. We originally cross-listed events that we were holding, but we eventually started combining events together.

On the Facebook group, we do have certain instances where we are concerned that certain posts might be overtly sexual or overtly sexist – sometimes racist – so we try to sometimes moderate, sometimes try to steer people in the right direction, to ensure that

people are comfortable posting in our group and to show that we're not just a boy's club. Also to show that there are other people here, not just gay cis men, who are also mostly white. We want to make sure that we are aware that our group is very, very diverse.

One example of a post that's minor... someone posted an image of the *Pokémon* characters in the shapes of letters and it spelled out a cuss word. So yeah, while we usually tolerate something like that, we usually contact the person and we ask them to remove the post. Usually the group moderates itself, but sometimes, there are some fires that we have to put out in the group.

I can't say for sure about my interactions with other gamers since most of my interactions have been with the gaymers for a while now. The Phoenix Gaymers are pretty much what takes up most of my free time. I am aware of other gaymer groups in the country. If I ever go to other cities, I try to check out their groups or at least try and network with their groups. I've been able to do that with groups in Austin, Houston, and San Diego. Each group has different levels of organization, I feel. The Houston Gaymers, are highly organized and are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. But then I've seen like the San Diego Gaymers and they're kind of like our group, but they started maybe two or three years ago, so they're kind of like getting their footing.

I grew up in Arizona for most of my life. Like, for most people, you have to go out and get into the bar scene because that's where the majority of gay people you're going to find are if you recently came out, so it's kind of like that. But that wasn't very successful for me. I mean, it's fine, but it's just not the greatest place to meet people. I started going into Meetup to find different outlets to meet people. When I'm out in the community and just talking to people about the group, it's nice when people have heard

of our group now. That awareness is increasing – and is still increasing – and that’s a good feeling.

I think sometimes people forget that we have women and trans people in the group, and sometimes they don’t consider going to our events. So, I think that just creates a perception that we are just a group for guys. So, we have female voices and trans voices, and we also have female voices on our Board also, and I think that helps to keep us aware of those issues. For the members that are trans that I’ve seen, we try to accommodate them by having guidelines on our badges where people can express their personal pronouns. Early on, this was something that was brought to our attention. But I feel that this is not only just a trans issue, but a disability issue too. In the previous space, the One Voice Community Center, it was small and it didn’t necessarily have the additional space for quiet rooms, things that certain people with some conditions might need, but those are some things that are also beyond our control sometimes. For instance, because a lot of our events are out in the public, it really depends on the resources the spaces have. Restaurants, might not have that much flexibility, but at the Gaymer Parties, we have a bit more room to space things out. We really haven’t had that much issue lately because, compared to the LGBTQ Pride Center, from the current location, it’s more accessible for people in wheelchairs and more spacious for people who need to get into a quieter area. But generally, if there are any problems, people usually bring things to our attention for us to address.

We are working on making the group self-sustaining as well as on making the group into a nonprofit so we can get more income so that we don’t have to worry as much about meeting our donation goals or about our rent at the center. We’re also working on

trying to be a bigger part of the LGBTQ community, where we participate in the Pride Parade every year, which is our chance to let people know that we are out there.

Reflections:

As a fellow queer person of color, I wanted to hear Wallace's thoughts on racial diversity and the Phoenix Gaymers. I did not really get that information. I was upset and disappointed with myself for not being able to get that information, or that I felt he tried steering away from that topic. It was a little hard to relate to him in that regard. But my approach and mindset were flawed. I feel like I tried relating to him on a superficial level, and I think that's where our conversation fell short. It reminds me of my classmate in high school, of trying to relate to and be friends with him but having things always just fall short. This makes me wonder, in this experience, how come I want, so badly, to be able to relate to others?

Erin

Character Description: White, female, bisexual, trans woman

Encounter:

I met Erin at the second monthly Gaymer Party I attended, well before starting this project. I remember her asking if she could join me and some other gaymers playing *Super Smash Bros.* and sitting close to me. I remember her introducing herself and apologizing if she was making anyone uncomfortable. I sensed some unease, but I don't know if it was from my own or sensing the tension from others, or both. I remember leaving to take a break to let someone else play, but I remember she eventually left and I went back to play.

I forgot about that interaction with her until I reached out to see if she was interested in being interviewed. Along with Enigma, I would play *The Red Dragon Inn* with them I sat next to her. I felt more comfortable talking to her in this interaction. She stood out to me, along with Enigma, as the only trans people I had seen at the gaymer events. Enigma told me later that I should reach out to Erin to interview her.

Story:

I have only been in the area for around nine months and heard about the Phoenix Gaymers in passing from one of the owners of the card shop. So a friend of mine and I went to one of their parties and, while my friend played board games, I played *Smash Bros.* for most of the night, but played some board games later on. We went to two other events, one was an ice cream social and the other was a Halloween gaymer party in October. The first time I went, I was incredibly nervous. Growing up, I never really got to go out anywhere, so I wasn't really used to social experiences. Everyone was really nice,

but there was one person who kind of made me scared to go back... or, I guess not scared, but hesitant to go back, due to a comment that they made. Otherwise, everyone was very nice, and it has been a nice place to relax and not feel judged.

The story about the person who made me hesitant to go back starts back when I was playing *Smash Bros.* in the video game room – and this was actually the reason why I left the *Smash Bros.* table and went to go with my friend across the building to the board game area. I was playing and someone arrived; they made a comment when I had my back turned and said, “Are there any girls here? I mean, do any girls ever come to this?” I turned to face him and he said, “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were a guy.” And that really hurt, but I tried not to think too much about that, since I didn’t have a name tag anyway, but it hurt. I vaguely mentioned it, since I didn’t know whether to report it or not... I didn’t want to be a bother, since... conditioning... but, then again, it was a problem and it bugged me, so I did mention it to the officers and they later made a post about nametags being a thing on the Facebook page.

I come from the New Orleans area and there isn’t much of a presence of an LGBTQ community there. It’s a tiny community, and I wasn’t really even a part of the community until I think, like, two years ago, when I was helping out a friend. It was around that time that I came out and I was lucky enough to have a friend who, you know, brought me over to my therapist and consoled me, saying that there are people here, and there’s a trans group, called the Louisiana Trans Advocates (LTA). I started going there once a month for their meetings, and they helped a lot and were my support circle, since I didn’t really have any other support circles. I got kicked out of the house because I came out to my parents and they didn’t take it well. About four or five months later, in April, I

ended up here in Phoenix; it seemed a lot nicer because I have my partner and the only outburst was with that person from the Phoenix Gaymers. Phoenix - and Arizona, in general - seem a lot more accepting than, you know, the South because... Bible belt, you know?

LTA usually happened once or twice a month, after a therapy session, and we would all sit down together and talk about anything that might've happened for that month. It wasn't as casual as the Phoenix Gaymers. It was more of a "talk about your feelings," "Are you okay?" thing, but the Phoenix Gaymers is more casual, sit-down; I don't have to worry about being judged by anyone and I feel as if I don't have to be the one to keep my head down, out of fear. It has good people and is more socializing.

I'd say that Phoenix Gaymers and my mom are the main reasons why I have a Facebook. I like to keep up on the posts and all that stuff. The salt threads, the events things... like, every time I see a post that I relate to, it's like, "I get that!" and it makes me happy because there are other people like me out there. Like, the older system involved posts, where I think I saw this one post on a collection of PlayStation 1 games, like I had that at one point and I get that, and seeing people raging about this, or seeing someone post saying "Hey, we're playing this game, does anyone want to join?" like, even if I don't get to, just seeing that activity there and being able to grab it at any moment to play and do it, and it makes me feel like it's a friend thing. It kind of makes me wish that other people could see this stuff and realize that they're just people and that whole thing. But it makes me happy; I don't think I've seen a single post there that makes me angry or upset or anything. I always check my schedule to see if I can make it to one event. Like, I want to go to an ice cream social, and I've bugged my roommate so much.

A lot of them are new experiences, which is kind of scary, but at the same time, it's people who I know are safe, so it makes me look forward to them, which is a new thing for me. I think the only time that something has happened that was more annoying than disturbing is when Enigma and I posted trying to get a ride to events and no one would respond. But that's okay, I mean, people have their own lives and I don't take offense to it.

I haven't had too many interactions. My social circles are incredibly tiny, because I didn't really have much time to develop them. I would say my inner circle is made up of maybe one or two people. I think the only difference is like, the person I was just playing games with, like, he's accepting and understanding and all that, but he's not in the community, he's an ally, so it's similar, but not the same. So he can support it, but not get it. I think with the Phoenix Gaymers, they get it. They might not get it, but they get it!

One thing I do wish there were more of... there were a couple of games that I have played that I would be hesitant to join guilds for because, like, when you join a guild at some point, you're like, "This is me. Nice to meet you." And you say something about yourself, about who you are. And I don't like hiding who I am, I mean, I had to do that for 22 years. So, at some point, you want to join a guild for one reason or another, but then you have to do so much more research to see if they are an ally or are they accepting or blah, blah, blah... and I remember for *EFO*, which is a game I still play, I spent four months looking for a guild. I thought I found one but I got insulted and stuff and it made me want to quit the game. So I wish there were more options in games because there seem to be so few, just the amount of places that are openly accepting... there are some places that, when you message them, they're like, "Oh yeah, cool." But I

feel like there isn't that open pride of, "We don't care what people think. We care about you and we love you," and I wish there were more of that, because I feel we're a silent group. It's more like comradery. Like, you're there and they're not going to make fun of you, but they also don't accept you. They tolerate you, but they don't accept you. There's a difference in that, and it's a difference between feeling welcomed and feeling like you're just there. I remember this one very active guild I joined, and other people were very active. Anytime someone asked for help with something or whatever, they got help. But when I asked for something or for items, I got no response or I was actively antagonized because I said something and brought it upon myself apparently. And it was basically: I'm there, but I'm not accepted, so what's the point of being in this group if I'm going to feel like I'm in a sidecar and they're just dragging me along with no interaction, and I feel that's one of the reasons why you join, because you need that interaction with others to some degree, and if you don't get that interaction, then you're just playing by yourself.

With the Phoenix Gaymers, I feel like I can go to any table and am able to ask, with confidence, if someone would like to play a game with me or if I can be a part of a game that's being played, because it feels warm. It's much less intimidating to ask someone who's a stranger because - with the exception of that one person - people are there to just be themselves and to get away from all the people outside who want to judge them and say mean stuff, and you know it's a good place and you don't have to worry.

With expression, a lot of it feels passive, as odd as it sounds; I think the raffles are sort of a part of it. Everyone is a part of that when it starts, and looking there, and congratulating those who win a prize, and this is after board games are played and after

people are kicking each other's butts in video games and that sort of thing, and it doesn't matter where you're from or what kind of upbringing you had, or what state you're from, or how you express yourself, as long as it's not in a dangerous manner, which I've not seen yet, then you know it's... I don't know how to express it, but you just know it... you just feel like you're a part of it, and everyone is just nice to one another.

Reflection:

Erin made me think about the different communities that we bring into the Phoenix Gaymers. She made me think - and realize - just how important this organization is for people. I am grateful that she is able to be comfortable and open in the Phoenix Gaymers and that she has them as a support group and social circle. However, I noticed, much like Enigma, that she would brush off or excuse others who either make blatant or subtle transphobic remarks as something that is not a big deal for her. I struggled with not telling her that it is not okay for her to be treated like that. Yet, I also cannot completely fault them without faulting myself. I realize I have my own shortcomings with trans issues and I am trying to learn and move through as an ally. But I feel myself becoming too self conscious, sometimes, of how I approach things. I could assume her identity markers but, when I asked her, I noticed myself pausing, not knowing what to say and trying to make myself better than those who are transphobic. I find this hesitation still makes me no better than back when I first met her.

Nan

Character Description: White, cis female, queer

Encounters:

Nan and I first interacted via email for this study. We would interact, face-to-face, where I would talk to her more about what I was hoping to get out of this project. I gave her some of my initial observations - namely, the lack of diversity - for the monthly Gaymer Party. She agreed, and said that a lot of their usual members were not around, surprisingly. However, she also noted that this was their first time being in the Parson's Health Center for their party. She seemed receptive for the lack of racial and gender diversity, but was also quick to explain why things were as they were.

Story:

I went to my very first event in November of 2014 and went to a few of the smaller events here and there until I felt comfortable, and finally went to a party. I have been on the board since May of 2015. I chose my current position with the board because it seemed interesting; I like volunteering and, in my position, what I do is communicate with other organizations that might need donations or just anything going on. I've had a couple of volunteer opportunities come up, so I'm the point of contact for anything to do with the community. Volunteering is very interesting because you get to be a participant in the community, which is important, and also, with the Phoenix Gaymers being a nonprofit, you get to be more focused in helping the community, so I was very excited to take on that position. So, I go on and play games and all that, which is great, but overall, I'm more into the community aspect of it.

My experiences with the LGBTQ community have been different here than elsewhere. In North Carolina, I felt that it was way easier to meet other gay people. Whereas over here it's just a little harder to communicate with other people; they're different here and they're kind of more conservative here, and so it was really hard for me. It feels like people aren't as social justice oriented here as they are in North Carolina. So like, moving here was kind of weird for me because I assumed most people were kind of more social justice oriented, and that was just a normal thing, but it's not over here. It's not horrible, but it wasn't what my partner and I expected when we moved here. I just find LGBTQ individuals here in Phoenix to be more, "So, how does that affect me?" instead of, "How does that affect somebody else?" I think it might be more of a Western mindset, more so than anything; like a Libertarian mindset, really. So it took a little while to get used to meeting people and doing things because it was just... it felt so different... Even when meeting with people on OkCupid, which is how I would meet friends in North Carolina, meeting them here, it was just a different brand of people on the website. So Meetup became a really important thing. I got involved with the Rainbows Festival one year and my partner had a point of contact who was doing a study there. From there, we met the board through Phoenix Pride, and they offered us to do another volunteer event with them because they liked how we worked, and that's how we got involved with them a little bit. My partner joined the board and I was just kind of like, I knew people there and I volunteered a little bit.

I actually control one of the social media outlets. So I guess it's a good place to communicate what's happening and just fun stuff. For interacting, I mean, Meetup was really great for social events. You can learn a lot about different events going on, and that

was how I found out about the Phoenix Gaymers, so that was really positive. There's just a lot of information there and it just comes right into your phone, and it's really great. And then Facebook, I try communicating information to others on the page, but I think it's kind of a hit or miss. I can be like, "Hey we're doing this" and Facebook can change its algorithms and, "Oh! Not everyone's going to see it unless you pay us!" We actually use the payment method once a month to boost our parties, so on the Friday before the party we pay, like, five dollars to help boost it, and it goes out to more people. So, it's been both positive and negative... like, trying to work ways around Facebook's algorithms so it works out the best for us. It's been kind of weird, but I also don't think it's just algorithms changing but because of the political climate, people have started to "Like" certain things. Like, for me, I started to "Like" new news agencies that I would have never followed before because I want more information, so I think that has also kicked us further back, because you just kind of get kicked back as you start to like new things.

Every time we do a Power Up party, our fundraiser events, I get really excited about how much is donated. You know, I'm not always aware of how much people have to donate or how much they're willing to share, so seeing people bring in a lot of stuff, like we took donations for St. Mary's and we got 122 items and like, we did school supplies for Tumbleweeds when I first started. Then even the trans clothing closet with Rebel and Divine, like that was really good and I was really excited to see people come out for those organizations because I don't know people who are interested in just helping is equally as exciting.

It can be difficult to connect with people in different organizations without an actual connection. Like, I would start out with an email to a specific person in an organization, who is working and doing donations, and I won't receive any email back. I mean, I even have problems with phone calls, which you would think would make it a little bit easier to get in touch with someone, but if you leave a voicemail, they sometimes don't get back to you. So yeah, it's not just always LGBTQ but – the board and I were talking about this last night - we're having an issue with having someone not communicate with us. But yeah, it's really frustrating and I'm surprised just what a big problem it is, and I don't know if it's just a non-profit problem or if it's not assigning communication as a priority. I have similar issues in my own work, where there are certain people who are really good at communicating, and others who are not really good at communicating and some of those people are leaders and should be communicating.

I actually had someone who kind of actually bullied me one time in an online post. Somebody used a picture that I had posted; I'm kind of a goofy person so I post a lot of pictures of me looking kind of goofy. I remember they, like, kind of cropped it and used it, put it up and made fun of me with it. It doesn't happen very often; it was just me, and I don't know why I was pointed out because I hadn't actually said anything in the post. But everybody had my back and we handled it. It was just weird. There were a couple of times when I called somebody out in a post and told them, "Hey, don't do that," and I was blocked because they don't like the fact that I told them that the way they were posting wasn't very helpful. That's not harmful, but it's kind of annoying. Like, you're trying to moderate, but you can't actually communicate with somebody.

Between gamers and gaymers, I dunno. I think they're somewhat similar, like, women are not always accepted in the gaming community and sometimes, while they might not make fun of you, they sometimes just don't take you as serious as them. I think that happens within the gaymer community as well, though not as much. I have a couple people that I feel don't like me, and sometimes I think it's because I'm a lady. They're not mean, but they just don't really seem interested in my opinions and things that often. Like, sometimes, people say hi to everyone except me, but I also don't know if it's just me, as a woman, or me, having done something one time that annoyed them and I just don't know it. But it feels that way sometimes, like, I don't mean to ever pit gay men against lesbians, but sometimes both sides seem to look down on the other side and sometimes it feels like that with certain members – not all members – but some members. Most members are really cool with me and I would say that I am accepted as a gamer a lot more in the gaymer community. Like, nobody questions my ability to play games or willingness to play games, or my excitement over the same things they're excited about. You know, we're all excited about the same thing, and that's really cool. I remember when I was in college, I would go to GameStop and this was back in 2005-ish, and you would walk in and a dude would be so excited to see a girl gamer, but they didn't take you seriously! They'll be like, "Oh, she's a pretty girl!" or "Oh, there's a girl talking to us!" or "She likes Zelda! What's that?!" but even then, you can feel that you weren't taken seriously. So I will say that I'm taken more seriously in the gaymer community, and that's really nice.

But, at the same time, I think there are problems and issues in the gaymer community where I've seen it's become a boy's club in social media. You know, where

sometimes you get someone who's like, "Hey boys! Tell me what types of dudes you like" and ehh... there's not just boys here. But, that's fine too, and I think we should be celebrating what we like, and it's a really weird thing to navigate, where I'm like, "Why aren't you asking about girls?" but, you should allow them to also be excited about boys, and you need to step off sometimes. It reminds me of growing up, thinking, "there aren't enough girls in books." I grew up reading a lot and there weren't a lot of girl heroes and that was disappointing, and you get to this point where you almost don't want to do anything without girl heroes because you want them so badly, and then you get into these spaces where you remember that boys need boy heroes too, so it's not fair to demand just girl heroes. That's something that's really hard for me to navigate.

We did a Player vs. Environment on trans representation in media, and I did talk to someone who went to that and she shared some of her experiences with that, which was really cool to just kind of talk about that, because it always goes back to masculinity and femininity and gaming and acceptance in gaming. While they are not in the Phoenix Gaymers, one of my exes is trans and so she shared some information about her experiences and she's a gaymer and a huge nerd. She was actually one of the ones to kind of help me be more vocal and she'll post things on Facebook that'll help me learn how to talk about things and not be an asshole.

To be honest, I don't have that many gamer friends who aren't gaymers. Most of my friends are not straight and I have a lot of geek friends, but not everyone I play with is gay. I have two friends who I play with outside of the Phoenix Gaymers and they're both gay, and we play probably weekly. My boss at work, we used to play *World of Warcraft* together and *Mass Effect Online* together, but I think our interactions were somewhat

similar; not much different. I played *Team Fortress 2* with one of my friends, so there are the interactions there, but you don't know if they're gay or straight. I know occasionally you'll get those types of people who are jerks and do use slurs and stuff, and they don't know that you're gay, but it's interesting.

Something that I'd like to see changed would be to see more ladies at the events. And not just because, you know... but I think that it would benefit the gay community, too, to come together more, so to see more ladies and to see more trans individuals come together and share spaces and everybody take in everybody and talk about their experiences and to understand their experiences that some are shared and some aren't shared, and to just talk about those things and to understand others in the community would be very helpful. I think as gaymers and as geeks, we experience a lot of the same things, and I think that it would help bring us together to share those basic things. And not always, because we have some who have walked into something very different based on what's happened to them. I would like to see more trans representation and more women representation in the Phoenix Gaymer environment.

I do notice that the smaller meetups tend to have more diversity than the large gaymer party meetup. We brought in a new board member a couple of months ago who's also a woman, and she said, "Yeah, I seen a lot more ladies at the ice cream socials" and even with the Noms, the food events, and I don't know if it's easier to get into those events, and when you're in a big party, everyone's already established so you don't know where you can get involved. Also, lesbians have this really weird thing where if, like, there's another lesbian there, they will try to act really cool and not interact. Not all, but sometimes I would see another lesbian at the grocery store and we would not talk to each

other. But part of it, for me, is that I don't want to assume that someone wants to talk to me because "we're similar: we both like ladies," that's not fair. But yeah, I definitely see more diversity at the smaller socials and I don't know why it doesn't transfer over to other events. I mean, it would be one thing if people first got into the smaller things and thought, "Yeah! I'd like to do some gaming together!" But I don't always see them come to the larger events, even after going to the smaller events, and I don't know what we could do, I mean it would be cool if someone had an idea, but I don't know how... but our membership, or our attendance, rather, has also gone down, ever since moving to the Parson's Health Center, which we're not entirely sure why that's happened either, because it's really close to the old place. Even some of our regulars won't attend. But we've also always kind of had a hard time getting ladies and trans individuals to the parties. I talked about doing a women's night, like there was interest for it, but things just kind of got busy and we had other things we were doing, but I'm also not sure if that's the answer. I'm not sure if the problem is if: do those minority groups that already belong to other minority groups feel like they won't be welcomed, or if something happened at the smaller things where they won't feel welcomed or they just have experiences that just say that they won't be welcomed, you know?

Reflection:

I enjoyed talking to Nan where, similar to Enigma and Erin, she was fairly conscious of some of the issues that are found in the gaymer community. However, also similar to Enigma and Erin, she brushed off her experiences of sexism. While part of me knows that it is a polite gesture, I also find this to be an odd experience that also places my privilege with my cis male body into the forefront. Gender is so easy to talk about,

but I find myself frustrated that talking about race is avoided or talked around. Am I trying to fit in race into a certain point of view that I am just not seeing? The frustrations of not being able to talk or see issues is building up, and as much as I want to talk about it, I can't. Maybe I am doing exactly what I just critiqued and choosing to brush off my personal feelings on the silence of racial bodies.

Chapter 3: Quest and Mission Objectives: Thematicizing Narratives Through Phenomenological Reduction

In Chapter 2, I provided my interviewees' and my experiences within the Phoenix Gaymers, the larger LGBTQ community, and our gaming communities. At this point, I will begin analyzing what I believe are predominant themes that are prevalent within everyone's narratives and experiences. In this chapter, I will provide five possible themes that came out from everyone's narratives through the use of imaginative free variation, which allows us to shift from "what" was experienced, into the "how" of experience. As such, this section will pull the exact language used from Chapter 2 to provide us with "revelatory phrases" that help to illuminate us how the phenomenon was enacted.

Feeling at Home

The most predominant theme throughout the numerous narratives was perhaps the desire to feel "at home." Many indicated that going to gay bars or the idea of making friends in gay clubs was not for them. At the same time, several indicated their apprehensions in playing with other gamers because, inevitably, there would be players who use language that is demeaning and homophobic or transphobic, and further, in the case of Erin, her experience in joining a guild was one where she was accepted but felt that she was "only just there" and was criticized when she asked for help because she identified as a trans gamer. While Cuppa indicated that it is inevitable in playing with others that you will get that one gamer who uses homophobic language and that it is something that you simply just do not bother correcting because you want to avoid the person becoming combative and having the situation escalate until it's out of control and ruins the game. At the same time, however, he added that it is bothersome and creates a

moment where he feels attacked or unsafe, regardless of whether the language was aimed at him or not.

What makes the Phoenix Gaymers a space for inclusion, as Cuppa mentioned, is the fact that everyone shares the experience of playing games and of wanting to escape from the outside world because everyone has had that experience of being looked down upon for being a nerd as well as having had experiences with homophobia within the gamer community. The Phoenix Gaymers tries to address issues that are brought up and announce any issues that might come up, as Erin showed when recounting the time when her gender identity was brought into question, being criticized for being a guy despite actually identifying as a woman.

In regard to social media, Phoenix Gaymer members post pictures, memes, or questions – such as asking whether anyone wants to play or hang out – which generally receive a response from others. Likewise, the Phoenix Gaymers page is often the hub for reminders of upcoming events held by the group, where members are able to ask questions about the event, or ask for a ride to an event. However, in the cases of Enigma and Erin when they tried to get rides to events, they did not receive any responses. Enigma indicated that, sometimes, while at an event they were able to attend:

“I don’t know if it’s because I’m trans or anything but I feel like some people are more welcoming than others, but I don’t know if it might be because they have their own cliques, but I’m never going to ascribe to malice. So, I’m just going to assume its clique-ishness with that. People naturally gravitate to groups and it’s just a human thing.”

He brushed off these instances as people having had better things to do rather than cater to him or go out of their way to assist him despite his call for help. Erin was a little more forward in these instances:

“I think the only time that something has happened that was more annoying than disturbing is when Enigma and I posted trying to get a ride to events and no one would respond. ”

Yet, even within these instances, she continued:

“But that’s okay, I mean, people have their own lives and I don’t take offense to it..”

In these scenarios, the feeling of home stems more from not wanting to act out and cause conflict within the group. Yet, these experiences can be seen as being necessary to create awareness for the larger group. As Wallace brought up, these incidents are looked at as ways to create more inclusivity:

“I think sometimes people forget that we have women and trans people in the group, and sometimes they don’t consider going to our events. So, I think that just creates a perception that we are just a group for guys. So, we have female voices and trans voices, and we also have female voices on our Board also, and I think that helps to keeps us aware of those issues. For the members that are trans that I’ve seen, we try to accommodate them by having guidelines on our badges where people can express their personal pronouns. Early on, this was something that was brought to our attention.”

Other instances to try and help others feel at ease and welcomed by the group and to be more personable were also mentioned by Cuppa and me:

“We had someone show up to our party once and, from what we found out from mutual people we knew, we found out that this person just broke up with somebody else who was in the group and he was obviously very sad about it. So we tried to talk to that person, but not in a way that’s like, ‘Oh hey! Everybody is talking behind your back!’ but like ‘Hey, is everything okay? Do you want to talk about anything? Or do you want to play a game and not talk about anything? We can do that.’ ”

“Near the end, I felt myself getting more comfortable within this space, but it was soon over. The co-president asked me how I was doing and what I thought, to which I responded that I was having a good time. It was certainly true, despite my awkward and overwhelmed feelings. Overall, I left feeling happy to have gone, despite not having interacted with others.”

There is a welcoming presence to the group which tries to bring together people who may not find community elsewhere. Yet, it can be difficult if one does not make any attempt for outreach and if an issue is left silent.

Stigma of “Gay”mer

To say that the Phoenix Gaymers is a utopia, however, is to ignore the issues around being a “gaymer.” Several have critiqued the concerns that the group is perceived as being a boy’s club, which has implications from the larger gamer community being catered to a primarily male (heterosexual) population. However, while the monthly gaymer parties often have more white, cis male gaymers, the smaller events often bring in a smaller and more diverse group that includes female gaymers and gaymers of colors.

Several of the interviewees observed the problem that the name “gaymer” implies that it is a group of gay men rather than that it can include other groups; Cuppa said:

“[I]t becomes a weird double-edged sword, the word “gaymer” has “gay” in it, so that’s why we can be seen as a boy’s club because it sounds like we’re a group of gay male gamers. Since, when you say the word “gay” you typically assume a gay male, instead of a gay female or anyone in the queer community. But the word is so search-engine optimized!”

He continued:

“...[W]e are seen as a kind of boy’s club because, and this might not be true but, gaming is seen as more of a boy/man activity, and we try to keep this open and we have girls who play video games or card games.”

While Nan elaborated further with her experiences between gamer and gaymer spaces:

“Between gamers and gaymers, I dunno. I think they’re somewhat similar, like, women are not always accepted in the gaming community and sometimes, while they might not make fun of you, they sometimes just don’t take you as serious as them. I think that happens within the gaymer community as well, though not as much. I have a couple people that I feel don’t like me, and sometimes I think it’s because I’m a lady. They’re not mean, but they just don’t really seem interested in my opinions and things that often. Like, sometimes, people say hi to everyone except me, but I also don’t know if it’s just me, as a woman, or me, having done something one time that annoyed them and I just don’t know it.”

The stigma of being a gamer becomes blurred with “gay”mer in the sense that it more easily describes an individual who identifies as gay and is also a gamer; however, there is

still a lack of intersectionality in the use for the word “gaymer” with genders other than cis male. While many in the Phoenix Gaymers are conscious of this issue, gaming still holds the stigma for others that it is a near-exclusive activity for men, while gayming still describes gaming as a pastime for gay men.

Community and Coming into Community

A similar theme to “Feeling at Home” is the theme of community and of becoming part of a community. While “home” may evoke feelings of comfort and belonging, community takes a broader scope and may not always evoke feelings of comfort and belonging and takes a more relational approach towards other communities. All participants come from or have experiences with other communities that they are – or were – a part of. Likewise, as Wallace indicated, the Phoenix Gaymers as it is today is the result of two social groups of the same name that joined together.

Just about all participants indicate that they came to the gaymer community to meet like-minded people with common interests. Even within the Phoenix Gaymers, the diversity of gaming has allowed gaymers to come together and, in the case of Magic, branch out to gather several other gaymers to meet more than once a month at the monthly gaymer party to play the card game, *Magic: The Gathering*, and other trading card and board games with other gaymers twice a week.

Others described a feeling of connection with other gaymers through social media, through related experiences. As Erin indicated,

“I like to keep up on the posts and all that stuff. The salt threads, the events things... like, every time I see a post that I relate to, it’s like, “I get that!” and it makes me happy because there are other people like me out there.”

Interestingly, with posts on the Facebook page, a few noted that inappropriate or questionable posts were often monitored by other members so that the board members did not need to moderate posts as much.

One of the things that makes the Phoenix Gaymers a bonded community is the similar previous experiences of other gaymers. Several interviewees recalled their experiences with other communities that they were a part of. Most of them, while still active in these other communities, indicated in some way that their communities influenced their coming into being with the Phoenix Gaymers. Cuppa stated:

“I’ve always been a gamer; I’ve always played video games and board games. But I never really knew any other gay people who play games as a majority of their life. I was dating someone in the group who told me about the Phoenix Gaymers.” In this instance, the communities involved were people from his personal circle and from the larger gamer community. He also indicated that it took him a while to actually meet up at an event:

“I was interested so I started following them on Facebook, but I lurked their Facebook page for about six months to a year before I finally decided to go to a meeting. I was super nervous and I drove up to the house, turned around and started heading home, but then I came back. I did that, like, three times before I got out of the car.” Even then, when at the event, he would recall not talking “to anyone for the first 20 minutes or so.”

Similarly, I found myself relating to this experience as well:

“I remember going there and being a little early. I didn’t see my friend and I began to feel awkward and out of place. I panicked and thought that this was a

repeat with just about any and all social events I go to – especially LGBTQ ones. I decided to walk around the area to explore. It was an older building in the middle of Downtown Phoenix, but it had a certain community feel to it – something that I did not know how to feel, but I decided to stay open-minded to it. My friend arrived and asked if I had signed in yet. I responded that I hadn't and we signed in together at the front desk where he introduced me to one of the presidents of the group. He gave me a tour of the different areas which included a room filled with food and all the video game consoles. On the other side, with the library, there were trading card games being played, and finally another room with board games. He asked what I was interested in doing, and, feeling anxious, guarded, and slightly overwhelmed, I responded with my go-to answer in this state, 'Um... I don't know? I guess I'll just watch *Smash Bros.*?' Patiently, he smiled and we walked back to the video game room."

Because my previous experiences with the LGBTQ community had been more negative, I felt guarded and overwhelmed at the event and I felt myself become hypervisible to everyone. This feeling continued until later on:

"...I stayed and watched people play *Super Smash Bros. for Wii U*. Eventually, I got enough courage to ask if I could join in, and I found myself playing the entire time. Near the end, I felt myself getting more comfortable within this space, but it was soon over. The co-president asked me how I was doing and what I thought, to which I responded that I was having a good time. It was certainly true, despite my awkward and overwhelmed feelings. Overall, I left feeling happy to have gone, despite not having interacted with others."

Coming into a new community brought feelings of anxiety; I had thoughts of wanting to fit in but felt guarded towards the unknown. Yet, as time went on, I started to feel comfort and that I belonged.

There were instances where others critiqued moments when the gaymer community was still not inclusive enough, as when Nan said:

“I have a couple people that I feel don’t like me, and sometimes I think it’s because I’m a lady. They’re not mean, but they just don’t really seem interested in my opinions and things that often. Like, sometimes, people say hi to everyone except me, but I also don’t know if it’s just me, as a woman, or me, having done something one time that annoyed them and I just don’t know it. But it feels that way sometimes, like, I don’t mean to ever pit gay men against lesbians, but sometimes both sides seem to look down on the other side and sometimes it feels like that with certain members – not all members – but some members.”

Though she noted that the gaymer community, compared to the gamer community, is more inclusive, this is a moment where the stigma of being a female gamer as secondary to a male gamer became apparent. A similar instance when gender identity was made apparent for use was also mentioned by Erin:

“I was playing and someone arrived; they made a comment when I had my back turned and said, ‘Are there any girls here? I mean, do any girls ever come to this?’

I turned to face him and he said, ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were a guy.’ ”

She would continue to mention that it hurt her and that, after some hesitation, she decided to report the incident:

“I vaguely mentioned it, since I didn’t know whether to report it or not... I didn’t want to be a bother, since... conditioning... but, then again, it was a problem and it bugged me, so I did mention it to the officers and they later made a post about nametags being a thing on the Facebook page.”

When something is mentioned and reported as a problem, the Phoenix Gaymers do their best to be thoughtful and inclusive of other members. However, if one has trauma that does not allow them to speak out their problems, then a more thoughtful approach is needed. Erin mentioned an experience of “conditioning” that caused her to not want to be a burden to others, even at the cost of her own well being. One should be willing to be mindful of the traumas that are found within more subaltern gender identities.

Anonymity Through Social Media

While I asked questions about my interviewee’s experiences with the Phoenix Gaymers’ social media, it was equally important to look at the experiences of larger social media websites that my interviewees were involved with beyond the Phoenix Gaymers. A particular theme that emerged was the experience of anonymity in social media.

Enigma’s experience in social media and anonymity was empowering for him when it came to being a leader in the role-playing forum:

“When I worked on the role-playing forum, I never really divulged my gender that much. I mean, I let anyone call me by whatever gender they wanted since I was genderfluid, so it didn’t matter to me anyways. And some would call me ‘he,’ and some would call me ‘they,’ and others would call me ‘she,’ and I didn’t want

anyone to know what the actual truth was. I felt I got more respect for being this enigma.”

Interestingly enough, when Erin would disclose that she was a trans woman to her guild, she mentioned having felt a sense of being in the group but only tolerated:

“I remember this one very active guild I joined, and other people were very active. Anytime someone asked for help with something or whatever, they got help. But when I asked for something or for items, I got no response or I was actively antagonized because I said something and brought it upon myself apparently. And it was basically: I’m there, but I’m not accepted, so what’s the point of being in this group if I’m going to feel like I’m in a sidecar and they’re just dragging me along with no interaction, and I feel that’s one of the reasons why you join, because you need that interaction with others to some degree, and if you don’t get that interaction, then you’re just playing by yourself.”

This creates an interesting conundrum: She could either stay as an enigma and let people choose to identify who she is while keeping her identity closeted, or come out and be potentially penalized for who she is. Interestingly, this goes into the rhetoric of coming out of the closet. This is further perpetrated with other gamers in their experiences with interactions with other gamers. Cuppa and Nan, respectively, said:

“...[Y]ou probably, like me, have been on Xbox Live and you’ve heard some very incendiary words, because people are playing shooters and things get heated, and sometimes they don’t mean it, but because they’re so angry...”

“I played *Team Fortress 2* with one of my friends, so there are the interactions there, but you don’t know if they’re gay or straight. I know occasionally you’ll get

those types of people who are jerks and do use slurs and stuff, and they don't know that you're gay, but it's interesting."

Within the Phoenix Gaymers, anonymity provides similar emotions, but in different forms. Sexuality is noted, but is much more blurred in the ethics of in/exclusion:

"...[S]ometimes you get someone who's like, "Hey boys! Tell me what types of dudes you like" and ehh... there's not just boys here. But, that's fine too, and I think we should be celebrating what we like, and it's a really weird thing to navigate, where I'm like, "Why aren't you asking about girls?" but, you should allow them to also be excited about boys, and you need to step off sometimes. It reminds me of growing up, thinking, "there aren't enough girls in books." I grew up reading a lot and there weren't a lot of girl heroes and that was disappointing, and you get to this point where you almost don't want to do anything without girl heroes because you want them so badly, and then you get into these spaces where you remember that boys need boy heroes too, so it's not fair to demand just girl heroes. That's something that's really hard for me to navigate."

Here, social media becomes a space where one (usually a gay male) can feel more open about his sexuality while female representation is brought into question. However, this is layered further in that this is also a space where a gay man may not be allowed to express his sexuality in the same way as he could in other groups, and thus, this is an instance where Nan chose to push aside her own feelings and thoughts. This can also be looked at in terms of body image as described by Cuppa:

"We had somebody for the longest time get mad if anybody posted pictures that had... not nudity per se, but pictures of shirtless men who were in shape. So, that

didn't violate the Facebook guidelines, and while I can understand you not wanting to see that, but it seemed... and, well, I won't be armchair psychologist but I think this person had body image issues on themselves. But then this person would post things with words that I wouldn't want posted on a page, like the F-word – not the “f-u” word, but the “f-a” F-word.”

Within a gaymer space, while sexuality might no longer be used in a derogatory sense, other issues found within the LGBTQ community could come up in its place.

Trolling in the Phoenix Gaymers's social media is no different from trolling elsewhere. While it does not happen often with the Phoenix Gaymers's social media outlets, a few interviewees noted instances where they witnessed or were themselves the targets of trolling, detailed here by myself, Nan, and Wallace, respectively:

“I received a text from a friend I had met in the Phoenix Gaymers. He told me that if I wanted to see some trolling on the Phoenix Gaymers Facebook page, I should check it out now before the officers took it down. While busy with other work, I was intrigued. I tried going through different posts and was not able to find the thread right away. Eventually I found the post and I read the subject and arguments: a debate on which console was better: the PlayStation 4 or the Xbox One. It was a typical debate question, worded to sound like a genuine question but which eventually became clear to be a loaded question. People posted and tried to respond with their thoughts and opinions, but the original poster shot them down, almost twisting their words. Eventually, the admins commented to be respectful of others' opinions, to which the original poster seemingly to display his

innocence, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just trying to get a clear answer.”

“I actually had someone who kind of actually bullied me one time in an online post. Somebody used a picture that I had posted; I’m kind of a goofy person so I post a lot of pictures of me looking kind of goofy. I remember they, like, kind of cropped it and used it, put it up and made fun of me with it. It doesn’t happen very often; it was just me, and I don’t know why I was pointed out because I hadn’t actually said anything in the post. But everybody had my back and we handled it. It was just weird.”

“On the Facebook group, we do have certain instances where we are concerned that certain posts might be overtly sexual or overtly sexist – sometimes racist – so we try to sometimes moderate, sometimes try to steer people in the right direction, to ensure that people are comfortable posting in our group and to show that we’re not just a boy’s club. Also to show that there are other people here, not just gay cis men, who are also mostly white. We want to make sure that we are aware that our group is very, very diverse.”

What is interesting in these instances is how all the experiences noted how the group tended to help with moderating against posts that were deemed hostile towards others. At the same time, all instances had some form of provocation involved. In this sense, anonymity in social media is utilized in a multitude of forms, from more traditional forms of trolling, to more implied structural and epistemological oppression that is either worked with, around or against an individual.

Maintaining and Changing

“We are working on making the group self-sustaining as well as on making the group into a nonprofit so we can get more income so that we don’t have to worry as much about meeting our donation goals or about our rent at the center. We’re also working on trying to be a bigger part of the LGBTQ community, where we participate in the Pride Parade every year, which is our chance to let people know that we are out there.”

There is a desire to reach out and become a larger scene in the LGBTQ community as evidenced here by Wallace’s statement. Understandably so, from what has been discussed so far. Perhaps more so for those who do not identify as gay cis men; a theme common throughout the interviews was the desire to have resources and more representation for trans people and gay women as commented on by Enigma and Nan:

“I would like to see more educational material on the Gaymer Facebook page or any of the other social media pages, not just to learn from one another, but also so we have resources available to share with our family. I remember when I came out to my dad, he refused to listen to anything that I said. And it was only through having help from the larger trans community I’m a part of that I knew how to handle things so it wouldn’t become a bigger problem. Chances are, there are a lot of questioning kids – college kids – who could benefit from, if they are gaymers, having at least a list of definitions to go by. I would love to see stuff like that.”

“Something that I’d like to see changed would be to see more ladies at the events.

And not just because, you know... but I think that it would benefit the gay community, too, to come together more, so to see more ladies and to see more trans individuals come together and share spaces and everybody take in

everybody and talk about their experiences and to understand their experiences that some are shared and some aren't shared, and to just talk about those things and to understand others in the community would be very helpful."

Yet, both Nan and Cuppa indicated that there were difficulties in trying to diversify their membership:

"I do notice that the smaller meetups tend to have more diversity than the large gaymer party meetup. We brought in a new board member a couple of months ago who's also a woman, and she said, "Yeah, I seen a lot more ladies at the ice cream socials" and even with the Noms, the food events, and I don't know if it's easier to get into those events, and when you're in a big party, everyone's already established so you don't know where you can get involved."

"It's hard to say how another group would experience something. I mean, you can't speak for someone, say, trans or bisexual. But we try to keep the group as inclusionary as possible; we try to keep people from saying things about other groups that they're not necessarily a part of or try not to give in to stereotypes. I mean, hey, we're all here to play games. It doesn't matter who someone feels romantically towards or sexually towards, or not at all, and we want to feel open. We're not, and sometimes people might see us as a dating group just because that seems to be like a connotation that if you're a gay group, you do stuff, well... like we've been accused of having orgies. Because that's what everyone assumes, when gay people meet and stuff. So trying to be inclusionary of everyone like when we take photos of the events or market events, we're trying not to say, "Hey, here's a bunch of photos with a bunch of white guys" and we want to be welcoming towards others... I dunno. I dunno how to say it. It's a touchy subject

for someone who isn't a part of some of these oppressed or looked down upon or more stereotyped groups, because it's easy for me to say we want to be open to everybody, but obviously being a white cis male person, you stand on this plateau of "Everything is fine up here!" when yeah, maybe in my experiences, but... at least the more that I speak to other people, the more conscious I become of things like that. So... I guess if the group being exclusionary is something that is a problem, I just don't know if that is something that I have the answer to because if you feel like you're just reaching out to one group, then you run the risk of making yourself look good."

They are conscious of trying to be inclusive towards others, yet they also hesitate on how to best approach the issue without coming off as either tokenizing or as looking towards a single individual in the particular group for all the answers. There is potential for the group to try to educate and learn about the issues that a minority group within their own group might have but there are also difficulties involved in doing so that are more structural.

It should be noted that the financial difficulties faced by the Phoenix Gaymers, as well as the time and energy spent to provide social events and maintain an active group, can be taxing. As a group that depends on donations, it is difficult for them to maintain themselves with no other source of payment. As Magic noted his wish for others:

"I just want to say that, as a nonprofit group, man, it is hard to squeeze money out of people. For anybody listening out there, for putting together an already amazing event, once a month, trying to get a couple of dollars from folks at these events, nonprofits have it rough out there. It is a really great group, and I will say

that they do a lot of good and giving donations for other people, but overall, again, I've been going here 12, 13, 14 years or so now... a very long time, and if the group wasn't around or if they just couldn't put on the events... I don't know if a lot of people here would have the outlets that they have here. You have people with social anxiety who don't get out of the house much, who don't have places to go to express themselves. There are not a whole lot of opportunities, aside from something like this."

This can be difficult, however, when the community has a more individualistic mindset versus a community mindset as Nan points out:

"I just find LGBTQ individuals here in Phoenix to be more, "So, how does that affect me?" instead of, "How does that affect somebody else?" I think it might be more of a Western mindset, more so than anything; like a Libertarian mindset, really."

A few noted how fragmented the LGBTQ community is, yet, as Nan tried reaching out to other groups, she was met with no response:

"I would start out with an email to a specific person in an organization, who is working and doing donations, and I won't receive any email back. I mean, I even have problems with phone calls, which you would think would make it a little bit easier to get in touch with someone, but if you leave a voicemail, they sometimes don't get back to you. So yeah, it's not just always LGBTQ but – the board and I were talking about this last night - we're having an issue with having someone not communicate with us. But yeah, it's really frustrating and I'm surprised just what

a big problem it is, and I don't know if it's just a non-profit problem or if it's not assigning communication as a priority.”

There are difficulties that are happening at both the personal and relational levels with respect to the larger structures in the overarching LGBTQ community. It is a fine balance in terms of trying to maintain the needs - both financial and social needs – of the group, as well as trying to reach out and connect to the larger community to become recognized as a group. It is also important to note the relationship between the individual and group needs. To reiterate, there is the issue that one does not often think beyond their own personal needs. This should instead be refocused on the group and larger collective's needs that may or may not personally benefit someone. Change can be difficult, yet the suggestions for providing potential resources on trans identity or where to go for certain LGBTQ issues is a potential, albeit small, change.

Chapter 4: Thickening Plots: Expanding Story with Phenomenological Interpretation

In Chapter 2, I provided descriptions of the gaymers' experiences, focusing on how they came to the Phoenix Gaymers as well as their experiences of inclusion and exclusion through social media and the face-to-face events the organization hosts. From those descriptions, I began analyzing key themes that came up in their conversations which brought up the issues of feeling at home, community and becoming part of community, and attempts for maintaining and changing their organization, in Chapter 3. At this point, through the phenomenological interpretation, I will provide discussion on what is happening in the Phoenix Gaymers.

Gaymer Privilege: Discussions on Who is Represented

It is without a doubt that there is more of an effort in becoming more inclusive by gaymers, regardless of gender, race, and sexuality than by the larger gamer community. Several interviewees mentioned that authority figures within the group were open and supportive and did outreaches to other groups to become more inclusive. However, at the same time, several also noted limitations in this attempt to become more inclusive.

Transphobia and sexism both still exist in this community despite efforts by the leadership to help address these issues as they arise. While it is important to note that many gaymers are more aware of these issues than in the larger gamer community, members – especially female and trans gaymers – reported feeling less welcomed because they were not cis men. Further, in all instances, they created excuses that redirected the issue as being their personal problem – either not wanting to assume that anyone has any malintent or that they are overthinking the issue. Given the personal

experiences that some of the interviewees have grown up with, this should not be surprising. Erin noted that she was hesitant to report her experience of transphobia to the officers of the Phoenix Gaymers, because of “conditioning,” which included being kicked out of her house when she came out as a trans woman, this would reflect what Shaw (2011) reported about those who were not cis male gamers not taking up the gamer identity as readily. While she decided to report her incident to the officers, it was through a conflicted debate that she decided to push for her own needs in order to preserve the peace within the organization. Ultimately, however, her reporting her incident to the Phoenix Gaymers brings in long term peace to bring in opportunity for trans awareness and inclusivity.

Several interviewees noted that the Phoenix Gaymers has a stigma of being a “boy’s club.” While there have been attempts to counter that narrative by the group, Nan indicated that it had been challenging to get more diversity and inclusion of female and trans gamers in the group. Several of the scholars that look at gaming and gender that I have cited indicate that this is not surprising (Shaw, 2011; Consalvo, 2012; Nakamura, 2012; Salter & Blogett, 2012). Through Hayes and Gee’s (2010) idea of affinity spaces, indicating that identity is usually an afterthought, looking at the Phoenix Gaymers in the context of the gaming community shows that the organization has not entirely taken into account the different gamer bodies that might be in this space. As several gamers mentioned, the Phoenix Gaymers was created as a reaction to homophobia in the gamer community but fails to take into account the privilege that is found within the gay cis men in their own community. In this sense, this became a space for socialization and fun but, while open to women and trans gamers, it will not allow for their total inclusion until

they confront the issues of cis male privilege that have been passed down from the larger LGBTQ and gamer communities, creating a form of gaymer privilege.

While I have spent a considerable amount of time discussing issues of sexism and transphobia, I should also include that race is very much a component of gaymer privilege. Race, unsurprisingly, is a topic that is subtly discussed but which is nonetheless prevalent throughout all interviews. Some of the interviewees mentioned that there exists a fine balance between representation versus tokenism when it comes to diversity, yet, as a few realized, racial diversity varied greatly between the larger gaymer party and smaller events. Though there is a risk between representation and tokenism, Lorde (2007) argues that this position is not sufficient to keep from doing more to reach out to queer people of color (QPOC) gaymers. While I should note that some in the gaymer community are very aware of these issues and have done small things to represent female gaymers and QPOC gaymers, the audiences they are advertising to within the LGBTQ community in Phoenix are predominantly white, gay, cis male centric, especially since one of the main LGBTQ community events they do is for Phoenix Pride which Phoenix QPOC have argued caters more towards gay white.

Gaymer privilege is the product of privilege that is passed down from the larger gaming and LGBTQ communities. It is an accumulation of people's experiences and observations in dealing with sexism and transphobia; it is what is implicitly and explicitly said in regards to race and other identity markers. The next two issues I will bring up will continue the discussion of gaymer privilege but will also discuss other issues that have come up in this study.

The Personal: For/Against the Master Narrative

To look at gaymer privilege and the dynamics that are at play, I will briefly bring up a discussion of the relationship between the personal and master narratives that are at work here. I will describe not just how the words were spoken, but how individuals enact the relationship between the two that create dynamics that go for and against the master narrative. In this section, I hope to tease out further how not just cis male privilege comes out in the Phoenix Gaymers but also how white privilege is especially prevalent here.

A form of semiotic phenomenology, “performing [personal] narrative, participants draw upon and combine a variety of discursive resources and conventions in a particular social and material condition in order to, as Merleau-Ponty says, turn back on the world we signify” (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 219). To look at personal narrative as a form of description, reduction, and interpretation in semiotic phenomenology, we can see that personal narrative performance becomes an embodied and lived practice of experience. For the master narrative, I turn to Corey (1998) and his discussion of how one can find a story that is similar to theirs but that does not allow them to completely relate; it is simply not their story. In comparing a person’s experience to the master narrative, we can see how one is resisting the master narrative to provide change and awareness. In this sense, I turn to Langellier (1999) as she notes, “personal narratives situates us not only among marginalized and muted experiences, but also among the mundane communication practices of ordinary people” (p. 126). This particular section becomes important in our discussion of how gaymers are un/intentionally practicing gaymer privilege and others are trying to resist the gaymer privilege narrative.

I bring in the discussion of the master narrative to remind us of hooks’s (n.d.) and Lorde’s (2007) discussions on patriarchy. If we are to view dominant society as being

gay, white, cis male – even within the smaller subgroup of the gaymer community – we are aware that there are blatant issues of sexism and transphobia but, for me, the lack of discussion of race is just as concerning, if not more so. Magic reported his immense satisfaction with the Phoenix Gaymers and had nothing but positive things to say about his experiences with the group – to the point where he expressed some remorse for having cause a branch-out by the trading card gaymers. I do not mean to say that one cannot have a purely positive experience, but his response is in stark contrast with other gaymers in the group who talked about some of the issues they experienced or witnessed that contradict him. It is here that I will argue that, through the lens of the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, the gaymer community is also a space of gay, white, cis male privilege. Given that QPOC have historically been discriminated against and exoticized within the LGBTQ community, I will argue that the social intersections between the larger LGBTQ and gamer communities have positioned power into racial privilege. The main gaymer party is the largest event held by the Phoenix Gaymers, yet several interviewees noted indirectly that the space is very white, indicating the lack of diversity in the group’s most important event. In describing whiteness, I look to Warren’s (2003) discussion of race as “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 29). This is to say, whiteness is not so much “*in the body, rather made through bodily acts*” (p. 29, *emphasis original*). Whiteness is then performed within this space, much in the same way that maleness is also performed and enacted through the body. This is evidenced in the case of Nan who felt as if her thoughts and opinions were not being taken seriously by a male gaymer because she was a woman, or in the way that Enigma noted how, despite a realtor posting on Facebook that he was willing to help people with getting a house or apartment,

Enigma's response went unanswered by the realtor. While it is true that one needs to be conscious not to accidentally tokenize a QPOC, one must also make the effort to learn the needs and concerns of the individual and group so that they can take the necessary actions and do the appropriate outreaches needed by QPOC within the group. A more active role in asking and getting to know people and the communities they are involved with is a start with branching out for further inclusion. I find that Gingrich-Philbrook's (2002) discussion on double binds in queer performance studies is helpful here. He mentions the double bind of representation/tokenism is to acknowledge that the "double bind becomes creative when we realize that 'one must choose and yet cannot choose one alternative without the other'" (p. 76; as cited by Peterson & Langellier, 1982). In this sense, risks are necessary and to deconstruct the double bind must be done if one is to better themselves and the organization. Simply put, reaching out to minority groups within the Phoenix Gaymers is a necessary action for its leaders to take in order to further advance inclusion of those groups.

As a performance of resistance, the Phoenix Gaymers are aware and problematize the name "gaymer" as a word that has more significance and meaning for gay men. More specifically, the word, "gay," was noted to signify "gay men" rather than "gay women" despite its interchangeable potential. Additionally, the idea of "gaming" was identified as being primarily a form of activity for men, such as when Nan noted her experience of having gone into a Gamestop and feeling as though she was being treated as a second-class citizen for being female, indicating the concept of a video game store as being a male space. This can also be seen in Enigma's story in which he, a genderflux trans man, was unnecessarily given the rules on how to play certain games. Another instance

occurred, as he described, when he and his friend, both trans people, felt as if they were being intentionally ignored, or, as was the case for Erin, faced with transphobic remarks. Likewise, as Nan mentioned, she felt as if there was no difference between gaymer and gamer when discussing how a female gamer is treated. Further, when looking at the demographics of the monthly gaymer party, it is clear that the event is predominantly male. In this sense, the stigma that the Phoenix Gaymers is portrayed as a boy's club is especially elevated here and is something which is then reinforced by the experiences in these spaces that were reported by the interviewees.

Home vs. Community: Distinctions Between a Welcoming Space and an Accountable Space

The Phoenix Gaymers, while an organization that was created as a social outlet to bring together LGBTQ individuals who did not quite fit in with the larger LGBTQ or gamer communities is not without its issues. As I have spent time discussing the issues that revolve around gender and race, I will now transition into a discussion on the themes of home and community which I will readdress as a focus for phenomenological interpretation. While home and community can be seen as being the same, both can also be seen as actually being very distinct spaces.

Recall that “home” is a space that signifies a welcoming and belonging feeling. It is important to note that all members interviewed indicated that the Phoenix Gaymers was a space that felt like home to them; everyone expressed some form of experience that indicated that the group was either their only real exposure to the LGBTQ community or that this organization was the first time that they felt welcomed within the LGBTQ community. Even when Erin experienced blatant transphobia, she later expressed that she

had never felt more connected to other gaymers, supported by her saying that she was able to relate to a number of the posts made on social media. These are strong indicators that the Phoenix Gaymers organization provides a welcoming space and, therefore, a home for LGBTQ individuals.

In the same breath, however, there needs to be a set difference between home and community. Whereas home can be a space of intimacy and safety, community focuses on the larger space that includes both good and bad. Therefore, we must also analyze the experiences of those who have had negative interactions with others in studying the community so that we can better describe it. I contend that a community space is also a space of accountability, which the officers of the Phoenix Gaymers demonstrate by penalizing members who post off-topic or distasteful information on their forums. In this sense, the Phoenix Gaymers do act out to try and create inclusivity in their community.

Conclusion: Do you wish to save? [Yes] - or - No

Throughout this study, I have attempted to be critical of gaymer communities in the ways in which they are inclusive and exclusive towards those who may or may not identify as gay white cis men. I hope that this study, while contributing to the growing pool of LGBTQ gamer and female gamer literature, has also displayed a more critical analysis of race in both the larger gamer community and gaymer subcommunity. I have also attempted to provide and expand more on the literature for QPOC in day-to-day interactions. At this point, as Fassett and Warren (2007) mention, “discerning how our communication, our performances and our language creates who we are and defines our work...is a reflexive act” (p. 50), I return to my reflection and journey with this project. I

return to the interactions I have had with others, which have helped me realize the importance of doing a study like this.

In my reflections to Enigma's stories, I told the story of Enigma mentioning to me that, before he came over to be interviewed, he told his trans friends on his Discord server about the project that I was doing and he mentioned to me that his friends were impressed by it. The importance of my project was further emphasized by Erin when she mentioned that she trusted me with her experiences in this study. On the one hand, this helped me realize the importance of continuing with my project and gave me the momentum to do so by showing me that this is a project that is not just for myself but for the gaymer community. On the other hand, I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach as I saw myself falling into a sort of savior role. While I am able to continue working with trans gaymers to get their stories out, it upsets me that I, as a cis man, am unable to truly relay the authenticity of their experiences. As a couple of members mentioned, having more education tools for those who are trans or allies to become aware of trans issues would be a start for trans people to feel more included. To this end, it is important to continue to think through and expand the literature on trans gaymers.

In writing this project, there were many times when I became upset with the current literature in gaming communities and race. I knew that gamer and gaymer communities were still very white-dominated, but even when reading an article like Nakamura (2012), who talks about QPOC gamers, I was unsatisfied. Talking things through with a friend who is also a QPOC gamer helped as I was processing through Hayes and Gee's (2010) affinity spaces and their component on identity. There is truth to their affinity space components in the sense that gaming communities are almost, if not

completely, color blind. Going into this site and interacting with my interviewees, I found myself frustrated that gender was talked about but not race. Race was and is always present in this space and even within the interviews themselves. Although I feel as though I was ultimately not successful in critically focusing on race in gaymer spaces, I also feel that I allowed race to be a more prevalent focus than it has been in other gamer scholarship.

I began this project not entirely sure of what I was looking for, nor was I completely confident in what I was doing. I did not believe myself when I said that this was a beneficial project for the gaymer community and, rather, considered this a project for myself. It is through the lived and continued experiences of others that I have begun to see myself as one story and one with numerous narratives and experiences. Our stories weave and intersect with one another - and the many stories that have yet to be told - but are still very much a part of the gaymer community. This project hopes to provide a space for more voices to be heard and for more research to be done with gaymers and their – our – lived experiences. This game has no “true” end and is one where I choose to save for another day, to start my next mission and my next chapter. I am queer. I am a gamer. I am a *gaymer*.

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