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Research Statement

According to Plato, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.” In many ways, this quote is central to my research on women and video games. While I specifically study video games, I am interested in how they reflect larger issues such as technology, leisure, gender, and play. In my dissertation, *License to Play: Women, Productivity, and Video Games*, I examine how video games are designed for and marketed to women.

Women and video games is a quickly changing domain of inquiry. With several different video games and gaming systems currently targeting feminine audiences, this emerging area of research is both important and timely. Often, past research on gender and video games primarily focused on young girls, and relatively few have examined women and video games in a separate context. My research interests, instead, are about women and video game play—and how this topic is indicative of larger issues of women and leisure. Thus, in my dissertation, I analyze several video games, advertising campaigns, video game reviews, and blogs, all relating to women and play. Additionally, I discuss feminist rhetoric of the past hundred years, and examine the role of play and leisure in this rhetoric. While studying women and video games, I was often struck by a problematic relationship between productivity and play—as such, a consistent tension between the two has become one of the main themes in my research.

For example, in one of my dissertation chapters I illustrate how video game advertising aimed at feminine audiences engenders this tension between productivity and play. Conducting an in-depth content analysis of 11 different magazines, in addition to web sites and television commercials, I evaluate video game advertising for the past two-and-a-half years in both typical video game magazines and general interest magazines—many targeted at feminine audiences. I then use semiotic analysis to better analyze specific advertising campaigns, showing gender differences, essentializations, and marginalizations between video game advertising for women and for men. While looking at magazine advertising that is aimed at women I discuss campaign slogans such as the one for the portable Nintendo DS system which encouraged readers of magazines such as *Oprah* and *Real Simple* to “Do something with your nothing.” This slogan is telling, and implies that the magazine’s readers, primarily women, should use digital play as a means to use up all available time so that they are never just doing “nothing.” Alternately, video games marketed towards men often marginalize women—either through sexualization or by representing women as uninterested in play.

In my dissertation I have also analyzed several video games that have specifically attempted to target adult female audiences. By doing textual analysis of games such as *Brain Age*, *Wii Fit*, *Diner Dash*, *Cooking Mama*, and *The Sims* that are specifically built for, marketed to, or recommended for women audiences, I have been able to track patterns these that reveal this inherent tension between productivity and play. For instance, games like *Diner Dash* illustrates the problematic relationship between work and play by having the player speedily wait on tables and satisfy customers. Thus, while the player is not actually being productive, the work that is being done in the game consistently emulates productivity. Other games often marketed to women such as *Brain Age* and *Wii Fit* actually attempt to be productive—they claim to improve the intelligence or fitness of players outside of the game. I discuss several different categories of games that are targeted at women audiences and illustrate how productivity is constantly in play.

In addition to advertising and game design, my dissertation also examines video game reviews and game blogs. In looking at video game reviews and blogs, I attempt to track discussions of women and video games both in and at the periphery of the gaming industry. At the same time, I address women and play from a more historical context, tracing tensions between gender and play through the past hundred years in feminist discussions and women's studies. Ultimately, I am able to relate all of these materials back to the tenuous and often problematic relationship between women and video games.

After completing my PhD, my initial research goal will be to turn my dissertation into two different book projects—one specifically focusing on video games and another tackling more historical approaches to women and play in general. For the former book project, I plan to continue to expand my survey of advertising, video games, and game reviews, to illuminate the topic more extensively. I also hope to begin to extend my research topics to include issues of race and class in video games. While these themes often define who is entitled to play specific games, it is a topic on which there is currently a dearth of literature. The second book project—on women and play—would require more in-depth historical research encompassing both feminist rhetoric and historical treatment of women and play in popular culture.

Additionally, I hope to also extend my video game research to use institutional ethnography methodologies, and ultimately plan to take more hands-on approaches to understanding women, play, and technology. One project that I am interested in beginning involves constructing “women's gaming circles.” This would involve gathering small groups of women (varying age, race, and class) to play both on their own and then reporting back and discussing their play experiences in groups—not unlike a book club. Using various game systems—from handheld games to online games to console systems—I hope to create a comfortable environment where women will be able to talk about their leisure habits and play preferences. This project, I feel, would benefit both media studies and women's studies, and I plan to apply for grants to fund this research. Ultimately, I hope to continue to use Plato's claim that, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation” to better understand the complexities that lie behind women, leisure, technology, and play.