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Your Abjection is in Another Castle: Julia Kristeva, Gamer Theory, and Identities-in-Différance

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YOUR ABJECTION IS IN ANOTHER CASTLE: JULIA KRISTEVA,
GAMER THEORY, AND IDENTITIES-IN-DIFFÉRANCE

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Ricardo Rodriguez Ramirez

June 2017

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Typified rhetorical situations are often a result of normalized ideologies within cultures; however, they also have the capability to produce new ideology. Within these discursive sites, identities are constructed among these normalized social acts. More importantly, these identities are constructed across many layers, not limited to one social act, but many that overlap and influence each other. In this paper, I focus on the identities that are constructed in marginalized spaces within sites of interacting discourse. Focusing on the rhetoric of abjection posited by Julia Kristeva, along with McKenzie Wark's exploration of gamespace, a liminal theoretical space that encompasses the sites of analysis and ideology formation from the perspective of gamers, I analyze disruptions of normalized social practices in the gaming genre in order to implement the use of abjection as a method of understanding how sites of difference produce meaning for minoritarian subjects.

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I'd like to thank, first and foremost, my loving partner Tamara, who stuck by me at my lowest and was there to lift my spirits when I felt as though I had nowhere else to turn. I'm grateful for her support and even her swift reality checks. This wouldn't have been possible without her by my side. Secondly, I'd like to thank my friend Jenn for providing me with the guidance and moral support I've needed to push for this thesis to happen (after so many hiatuses). Lastly, I'd like to thank my good friend and intellectual soundboard, Bridget, whose company and conversation helped calcify my ideas. Without these three supportive and caring women pushing me, believing in me, and knocking me down a peg or two, this would not have been possible.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my loving family: Ricardo Muñoz Ramirez, Monica Rodriguez Ramirez, Maribel Garcia Rodriguez, Mariana Ramirez Rodriguez, and my nephews Chris and Joey. Moreover, I must also include the Larrs: Connie, Doug, Tamara, Jenn, and Devan.

I also dedicate this to my friends who were there for me whenever I needed to vent, have a shift covered, or a night of video games and pizza. I couldn't ask for better people to take me away from the stress of academia and offer me much needed respite.

Lastly, this is dedicated to the faculty who have helped me achieve this monumental accomplishment. Thank you to my readers, Dr. Jackie Rhodes and Dr. Chad Luck. And a special thanks to Mary Boland who stepped in at the buzzer for a clutch save. This couldn't have happened without her.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER ONE: CONFERENCE PAPER PROPOSAL.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: CONFERENCE PAPER	
Introduction	2
Research	4
Application	6
Conclusion	12
CHAPTER THREE: JOURNAL ARTICLE	
Introduction	15
Exploring Abjection	18
Applying Abjection	27
The Abject Gaming Genre - Narrative	31
The Abject Gaming Genre – Glitches, Hacks, and Mods	38
The Abject Gaming Genre – Gamer Culture and Genre Studies ..	43
Conclusion – Abjective Academia.....	48
REFERENCES	53

CHAPTER ONE
CONFERENCE PAPER PROPOSAL

Typified rhetorical situations are often a result of normalized ideologies within cultures; however, they also have the capability to produce new ideology. Within these discursive sites, identities are constructed among these normalized social acts. More importantly, these identities are constructed across many layers, not limited to one social act, but many that overlap and influence each other. In this paper, I focus on the identities that are constructed in marginalized spaces within sites of interacting discourse. Focusing on the rhetoric of abjection posited by Julia Kristeva, along with McKenzie Wark's exploration of gamespace, a liminal theoretical space that encompasses the sites of analysis and ideology formation from the perspective of gamers, I analyze disruptions of normalized social practices in the gaming genre in order to implement the use of abjection as a method of understanding how sites of difference produce meaning for minoritarian subjects.

CHAPTER TWO

CONFERENCE PAPER

Introduction

Whether we're discussing video games in the classroom and the gamification of education, creating and playing a game that will help research a cure for cancer, or questioning the ethics of remotely controlled unmanned aerial vehicles, the social influence of interacting within digital spaces and integrating our lived experiences within those spaces has become part of our normal lives. Crossing the threshold into digital communities may allow us to share our selves with the world, but many are still subjugated to self-identifying outside normalized social practices, even online. Women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community face discrimination and a lack of acknowledgment within gaming culture, as they do in many spaces but with much more vitriolic consequences. Their experiences are objects of the reinforced socially accepted ideologies within the gaming industry which reverberate along society, within discourse, and in classrooms. The aim of this essay is to explore objects across the gaming genre's interrelating layers, including games as texts housing traditional uses of narrative objects, games as software housing digital objects, and gaming as discursive social sites constructing social objects.

With this understanding, another focus of this project is to support the application of abjection as a method for understanding students' knowledge acquisition. In their interactions with new theories, vocabularies, and ways of

seeing or reading a text, students seek to understand new information and apply it to knowledge they are familiar with as a stepping stone towards better understanding new concepts. Other post-structuralists, like Foucault and Derrida, have been held up as examples of how differences-in-meaning foster knowledge acquisition; Julia Kristeva can also fit within this dynamic. As educators, we attempt to establish connections by scaffolding lessons. However, depending on a student's affinity for working within the margins of what they know as "truth" and the new knowledge they are forced to encounter as another "truth," learning complex theories may be a struggle for identifying as a member of academia.

When working with first-year and first generation college students, we often ask what their thoughts are on material they have never encountered before, things which have existed outside of their pre-constructed notions of normalcy. They become minoritarian subjects of academic discourse, especially when other identificatory factors, like gender, race, and sexual orientation, have previously made them subjects of social stigmas. A pedagogical strategy is to ask what they do not like about the material; this provides them with a moment to reflect on their pre-conceived truths in conflict with the application of this new knowledge. It is within this process of railing against majoritarian ideology that knowledge work happens. As a genre that promotes learning by doing (in a virtual space), gaming allows a medium of exploration that isn't simply possible in classroom discussions or from metaphorical concepts on a page, but to get to an understanding of abjection in this discursive site, I explore various uses of

Kristeva's theory to posit my own. After excavating the rhetoric involved in describing and implementing abjection, I will explore its use-value within gamespace; not only focusing on video games themselves, but intersectionally across the culture surrounding them.

In this essay, I implement Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, McKenzie Wark's *Gamer Theory*, and Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* to explore the concept of individual subjects doing self-reflective meaningful work within the margins of a culture. In navigating Kristeva's metaphoric language and poetic exploration of what it is to approach abjection, I formulate a guideline to follow for my exploration. Wark's explanation of gamespace, which is the liminal space between the simulated realities within video games and the culture where they are played, produced, and discussed, provides a method for understanding overlap and influence each other (Wark 15). Anthropy provides a look into a gaming genre's ideologies towards the LGBTQ community, shares methods its minoritarian members use to shift these ways of thinking, and calls for more diverse inclusivity in gaming.

Research

Kristeva describes the abject in a way that cannot be condensed within a simple definition, as it can be found within multiple sites depending on a subject's experience, and rather than tangibly describing what approaching abjection looks like, she describes the emotions and instinctual responses our bodies perform when reacting to abjection. This establishes the qualifier that abjection is what

repulses us, experienced within the margins between the acceptable and the unacceptable. It is in this liminal space wherein the abject fascinates us as well. It is why we can't ignore "it" when it does occur, despite us scorning its existence.

The abject is something that is neither subject nor object. Kristeva describes an outlier that has no corporeality or meaning on its own, but with the weight of the surrounding culture's interpretation of that abject, it becomes destructive to a subject that encounters it. It annihilates them, should they acknowledge it (Kristeva 2). To accept this otherness would be to accept what is not acceptable within the boundaries created by society. Knowing this, the abject and abjection become "safety railings" to protect an individual subject from social self-destruction (Kristeva 2). The abject exists in the spaces we deny, and its visibility (or invisibility) is determined by the people within those safety railings.

Kristeva gives the example of the cadaver as an abject, a signifier of death, but more importantly connected to her ideas, it signifies the absence of life. As she writes, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (Kristeva 4). It is here where most understand abjection and use the idea of a corpse to signify the abject, but the corpse is a metaphor Kristeva uses to establish its meaning to a preconceived "truth" her audience is familiar with. Holding up the concept of death as an abject of life, allows her to explore the intangible properties of abjection. To depict the abject, mold abjection and

program it, or to write the abject systematically negates it. You cannot assimilate abjection, but you can use signifiers to understand it.

Karen Coats' use of abjection in "Abjection in Adolescent Fiction," describes the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, where adolescents reflect on their identity and reconstruct it to meet the expectations of a society that now views them as young adults. José Esteban Muñoz, in his book *Disidentifications*, showcases a process many marginalized individuals establishing their identities outside of acceptable societal spaces experience as they try to construct meaningful connections between themselves and their surrounding communities. Lastly, abjection is pervasive when it comes to discussing horror genres, most notably in film studies. Nick Mansfield and Tina Chanter both describe the use of abjection when analyzing film, genres, and the properties of abject horror. Mansfield takes a very literal explication of Kristeva's approach to abjection when he describes it as a subject's necessity to repel an abject for the sake of maintaining their autonomy and individuality. However, abjection not only works to describe an act of repulsion, but also views this repulsion as an act of transgression towards a socially accepted norm. Chanter explores this concept closely in writing that the abject's very nature is to undercut what we believe to be normal.

Application

As previously stated, abjection has many functions:

- It has the experienter construct guidelines/safety rails which keep them part of what is acceptable normative practices;
- It seeks to subvert the experienter's dominant societal understandings of normative practices;
- It is an ambiguous space where the experienter may stray into and revel in what they once strived to negate; and
- It is a transgressive/transformative process for a subject to restructure their identity and how they perceive it within established ideologies.

For Kristeva, Muñoz, Coats, Mansfield, and Chanter, abjection exists in a liminal space between the experienter (subject), the society and culture surrounding them (object), and the primal instincts or ejected behaviors outside of normalcy (abject). But describing it as the sum of three parts limits the understanding, as we are all subject to abjection and various normative practices. While some practices are shared within a culture, discourse, or genre, the experiencers within are unique. Each individual has their own concept of subject-object-abject.

Furthermore, when we apply this to a gamespace, we further stretch abjection's theoretical scope.

I first explore gaming as a narrative text, using Konami's *Silent Hill 2* and *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, as well as Square Enix's *NieR* as examples of overlapping gamespaces creating abject signifiers. I determined that *Silent Hill 2*'s use of the grotesque, commonly seen in the horror genre, to manifest abjects

that represent the protagonist's trauma, including the physical manifestation of his dead wife which seeks to destroy him either mentally or physically. In *Snake Eater*, I compare Snake's many abilities to kill his enemies to the player's willingness to explore diverse use of lethal tactics. Abjection here is also experienced through the game's narrative as Snake faces off with the apparitions of his deceased enemies, but unlike *Silent Hill 2*, these enemies are programmed to not appear at all if the player chooses to use non-lethal playstyles. So not only is abjection in the narrative, but it is implemented by the developer, subverting the player's past experience with video games and questioning the violence that is prevalent in the action game genre. Lastly, *NieR* is another game that subverts the player's expectation of how a video games work. It's become common for gamers to earn rewards for completing specific objectives in video games; these awards are called Trophies and Achievements that are displayed on their Playstation or Xbox gamer profile. *Nier's* creator, seeks to disrupt this process by erasing the player's saved game data in exchange for meeting the requirements of obtaining all of *Nier's* trophies. These instances seek to disrupt and question normative gaming practices that lead a subject to question their actions and reconfigure their behaviors when viewing video games simply as narrative texts. Imagine the protagonist in a novel losing their memory as you progress within your reading, never allowing you to know the full breadth of truth within the novel

Expanding on the previous section, I deconstruct video game narratives as metaphors of what we experience in our daily lives. They reflect of ideologies

we hold, but make up only one gamespace. Video game developers construct habitable, functional environments, but these structures will also fall apart at times. With so much programming done by various people piecing together lines of code to create a whole, it is unsurprising that sometimes these lines do not meet. There are crevices that they sometimes overlook creating abject experiences for developers, publishers, players, or the game script itself. There are three disruptive occurrences I discuss in my work that meet the criteria for creating abject experiences: glitches, hacks, and mods. Glitches are a near-perfect embodiment of the abject. They occur seemingly at random and without warning. They interrupt normalcy in a game's programmed design, narrative, and a player, character, and player-character's experience. Hacking and modding a game involves changing lines of code to alter its performance. Whereas glitches are an abject for all parties, hacks and mods are an abject for the game. Players become identities-in-difference within the code. Games as computer software give us access to a liminal gamespace showcasing abjection as a subversive experience, as Kristeva explains.

For the purpose of my research, I refer to the many different communities surrounding video games as "the gaming genre." When describing its members, I consider any and all individuals who have grown up interacting with and discussing video games from a game player's perspective, which is an important value to establish. In allowing such limitations, emphasis is placed on members of the genre setting the standard, and we can culture map their attitudes and

ideologies. The gaming genre features a wide array of thinkers and creators that set the topics of discussion in this culture. Not only can we rely on gamers themselves to create counter-culture gaming content that pushes against the norm and sets new standards open to diverse audiences, but the genre also benefits from people on the forefront of this culture. For instance, we have academic work of Ian Bogost and Jesper Juul in game studies, journalists like N’Gai Croal and his articles on racism in the gaming industry, and Anita Sarkeesian’s focus on analyzing games from a feminist perspective; in addition, many self-made YouTube gaming celebrities such as Markiplier or PewDiePie take it upon themselves to voice their opinions on social media and call their viewers to action on topics ranging from charity donations to simply asking them to be more open and kind to their peers. The genre of gaming is part of an expansive gamespace and the ideologies of the genre have been under much strife for quite some time as conflicting ideologies have emerged since its beginnings.

In their collaborative study of genre theory, Amy Devitt, Anis Bawarshi, and Mary Jo Reiff describe genre as being “sites of social and ideological action” (542). As a site of social and ideological action, gaming is home to those who got there first, mainly wealthier middle class white men who could afford early computers, which leads to issues of sexism, homophobia, and racism commonplace in the gaming industry. The most recent issue of contention in gaming has been the rise of the Gamergate movement, causing an even greater

division among gamers. Members of Gamergate claim a desire to keep game journalism objective and focused on video games and their content without focusing on the motivations of the creator or the influences for their creative design, nor the social impact games can make when it comes to identity politics. More vehemently, they wish to keep gaming away from social justice issues, as they believe they don't have a place in a genre they think should only focus on entertainment. But the entertainment they describe perpetuates the interests of a singular demographic in gaming who discredit the legitimacy of any other members with complaints for not being able to enjoy what is available. Carolyn Miller asserts the longevity of a genre is determined by its recursiveness, describing them as "typified rhetorical actions in recurrent situations," and she concludes, "members of a genre are discourses that are complete, in the sense that they are circumscribed by a relatively complete shift in rhetorical situation" (159). So, a genre is only legitimate if it is relevant, recurring, and supported by some sort of substantive need by its members. The battle between Gamergate and other members of the gaming genre wishing for more diversity is the cause of two subsets of members creating a shift between gaming's typified rhetorical actions. This shift is common in all genres, as they tend to transform to stay relevant to a cultures' needs.

Conclusion

In establishing the four guidelines I set for implementing a framework to discuss abjection in gaming, the following three areas of exploration guide us in understanding how abjection disrupts normalized practices:

- The subject is the experiencer/participant of the disruption.
- The object provides the subject meaning.
- The abject collapses the meaning of the object and provides new meaning for the subject.

Simply put, there are three factors that are at play when abjection is experienced: subject, object, and abject. When discussing the role of abjection in academics, there are concepts already established in rhetoric and composition: identification, social construction, and deconstruction all help to describe students whose identities-in-difference struggle with their identities' indifference to acquiring new knowledge. Before the social turn, little time was spent on focusing on process, but since then, many students half-learn what they need to pass their classes until hopefully calcifying this new knowledge with praxis. As they learn new terms and concepts, they seek to make connections while educators provide the means to do so. If the student is the *subject*, knowledge is an *abject* that challenges the meanings of pre-established "objective" truths. Praxis is necessary to establishing new truths, but as we know, praxis is an ugly, arduous, and disheartening process for many. This cannot be denied as we consider first-generation college students who struggle as they enter the university, as

Bartholomae had once said. Praxis is a site of abjection, and video games are a site of multilayered praxis.

The epistemological concept of establishing meaning through visualizing differences is established by Derrida's "différance" as well as in Foucault's *The Order of Things*, saying knowledge acquisition would "no longer consist in drawing things together," that on the contrary, "discrimination imposes upon comparison the primary and fundamental investigation of difference: providing oneself by intuition with a distinct representation of things, and apprehending clearly the inevitable connection between one element in a series and that which immediately follows it" (Foucault 55). If we view writing as a process which establishes difference and writing as thinking how these meanings interrelate, then learning to construct meaning can quickly become a revolt of being. This may seem like a stretch; however, I don't believe Kristeva's vocabulary should deter us from accepting abjection in the same way we have embraced other post-structuralists. Furthermore, academic knowledge is also a force that if accepted, can "annihilate" what a learner has known since then as truth, as we so often teach when we discuss first generation college students from working class backgrounds. As identities-in-difference, they traverse through discourses, literacies, semiotic domains, and gamespaces learning the code of the system as they try to find meaningful connections.

Gamespace, abjection, and academia come together when we look to Miller and Bawarshi's work in genre studies as these sites of discourse which

overlap. As recursive sites of typified rhetorical action, entering a new space from another which a student is knowledgeable in will often lead to simultaneous disruption and meaning-making. Students enter the gamespace of the university by relating it to a previous gamespace, like high school, junior college, retail services, texting, drawing, writing on social media, and many other varied 21st century literacies. We bridge the gap by understanding knowledge acquisition as a process created in *différance*, and we close that gap by meeting students halfway by placing ourselves in that difference with them. Approach the abjection of teaching outside of what we know rather than clutching on to a safety rail. Let student expertise construct that meaning to scaffold their own purposeful identity. Whether that means reading new material, applying new pedagogy, or experimenting with our own, we must become the shift in the genre, even if that shift is only limited to a single classroom, we must allow knowledge-making abjections to occur when they appear and revel in them rather than negate them as meaningless.

CHAPTER THREE

JOURNAL ARTICLE

Introduction

Whether we're discussing video games in the classroom and the gamification of education, creating and playing a game that will help research a cure for cancer, or questioning the ethics of remotely controlled unmanned aerial vehicles, the social influence of interacting within digital spaces and integrating our lived experiences within those spaces has become part of our normal lives. Crossing the threshold into digital communities may allow us to share our selves with the world, but many are still subjugated to self-identifying outside normalized social practices, even online. Women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community face discrimination and a lack of acknowledgment within gaming culture, as they do within many cultural spaces, but with a trend of personal attacks which go viral on the internet and lead to real world threats against the targets and their loved ones. Interacting within this cultural hegemony often leads these othered audiences to create their own methods of identification, reflection, and self-preservation within the communities they belong to and want to make progress in. Their experiences are objects of the reinforced socially accepted ideologies within the gaming industry which reverberate along society, within discourse, and in classrooms. The aim of this essay is to explore objects across the gaming genre's interrelating layers, including games as texts housing

traditional uses of narrative objects, games as software housing digital objects, and gaming as discursive social sites constructing social objects.

With this understanding, another focus of this project is to support the application of abjection as a method for understanding students' knowledge acquisition. In their interactions with new theories, vocabularies, and ways of seeing or reading a text, students seek to understand new information and apply it to knowledge they are familiar with as a stepping stone towards better understanding new concepts. Other post-structuralists, like Foucault and Derrida, have been held up as examples of how differences-in-meaning foster knowledge acquisition; Julia Kristeva would fit within this dynamic just as well. As educators, we attempt to establish connections by scaffolding lessons. However, depending on a student's affinity for working within the margins of what they know as "truth" and the new knowledge they are forced to encounter as another "truth," learning complex theories may be a struggle for identifying as a member of academia.

When working with first-year and/or first generation college students, we often ask what their thoughts are on material they have never encountered before, things which have existed outside of their pre-constructed notions of normalcy. They become minoritarian subjects of academic discourse, especially when other identificatory factors, like gender, race, and sexual orientation, have previously made them subjects of social stigmas. A pedagogical strategy is to ask what they do not like about the material; this provides them with a moment to reflect on their pre-conceived truths in conflict with the application of this new

knowledge. It is within this process of railing against majoritarian ideology that knowledge work happens. As a genre that promotes learning by doing (in a virtual space), gaming allows a breadth of exploration that isn't simply possible in classroom discussions or from metaphorical concepts on a page, but to get to an understanding of abjection in this discursive site, I explore various uses of Kristeva's theory to posit my own.

In this essay, I implement Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, McKenzie Wark's *Gamer Theory*, and Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* to explore the concept of individual subjects doing self-reflective meaningful work within the margins of a culture. In navigating Kristeva's metaphoric language and poetic exploration of what it is to approach abjection, I formulate a guideline to follow for my exploration. Wark's explanation of gamespace, which is the liminal space between the simulated realities within video games and the culture where they are played, produced, and discussed, provides a method for understanding the overlap and influence these spaces have on each other (Wark 15). Anthropy provides a look into a gaming genre's ideologies towards the LGBTQ community, shares methods its minoritarian members use to shift these ways of thinking, and calls for more diverse inclusivity in gaming.

The abject has largely been used as a lens of narratological exploration in media, but the language of abjection is particular in the way it describes lived experience and identity formation outside societal norms, especially regarding

gender and sexuality. Julia Kristeva is lauded as a feminist theorist that champions making the strange familiar, and her contributions to rhetorical theory support a notion of a subject escaping determinism by immersion in the struggle of a being in process (Clark 317). For Kristeva, woman is the strange made familiar by asserting her autonomy in social spaces, but Kristeva's work goes beyond this dualistic approach, opposing any rhetoric that denies marginality (Clark 314). After excavating the rhetoric involved in describing and implementing abjection, I will explore its use-value within gamespace; not only focusing on video games themselves, but on their intersectionality within the culture surrounding them.

Exploring Abjection

Kristeva begins "Approaching Abjection" by describing the symbolic properties of a space that would theoretically house the abject:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. (1)

Abjection is what disgusts, repulses, defiles, and sickens, and what we reject as conformed subjects within normalized social practices. But what is it exactly?

Kristeva describes the abject in a way that cannot be condensed within a simple definition, as it can be found within multiple sites depending on a subject's experience, and rather than tangibly describing what approaching abjection looks like, she describes the emotions and instinctual responses our bodies perform when reacting to abjection. This establishes the qualifier that abjection is what repulses us, experienced within the margins between the acceptable and the unacceptable. It is in this liminal space wherein the abject fascinates us as well. It is why we can't ignore "it" when it does occur, despite us scorning its existence.

The abject is something that is neither subject nor object. Kristeva describes an outlier that has no corporeality or meaning on its own, but with the weight of the surrounding culture's interpretation of that abject, it becomes destructive to a subject that encounters it. It annihilates them, should they acknowledge it (Kristeva 2). To accept this otherness would be to accept what is not acceptable by the boundaries created by society. Knowing this, the abject and abjection become "safety railings" to protect an individual subject from social self-destruction (Kristeva 2). The abject exists in the spaces we deny, and its visibility (or invisibility) is determined by the people within those safety railings.

Kristeva gives the example of the cadaver as an abject, a signifier of death, but more importantly connected to her ideas, it signifies the absence of life. As she writes, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an

object” (Kristeva 4). It is here where most understand abjection and use the idea of a corpse to signify the abject, but the corpse is a metaphor for the abject that Kristeva uses to establish its meaning to a preconceived “truth” her audience is familiar with. Holding up the concept of death as an abject of life, allows her to explore what abjection more closely resembles. To depict the abject, mold abjection and program it, or write the abject systematically negates it. You cannot assimilate abjection, but signifiers are created with it in mind.

To those who revel in signifiers of the abject, Kristeva believes that specific socially controversial acts are performed within abjection. The act itself is separate from the concept, but it is the forbidden concept that may inspire a subject to find pleasure in the act (Kristeva 9). Although we confuse abjection to be the boundaries which we keep us within the safety of our normative practices, abjection is not a boundary. It is an ambiguous threshold one steps toward but might not openly cross, neither subject nor object, but a space that seduces a subject out of pre-autonomous desire. Kristeva writes,

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also, because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the

immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another
in order to be... (10)

The abject is not an “otherness” we have cast out, but a source of “pre-objectal” understanding of our surrounding culture and society. It is home to primordial concepts that we formed borders around to keep from encountering. We formed borders, thoughts, and language to define what we are separate from, from ideas that have been negated over time. But repressed subjects stray to this space to be what it was before the restrictions of language and meaning. However, structures of ideas, beliefs, ideologies, philosophies, laws, religions, and rules deter individual subjects from approaching abjection.

Abjection is the liminal space where we shape what we are and what we cannot be. Kristeva’s theory of abjection has been used within many genres to describe an abject, but rarely is abjection described as a process happening within those genres, which is what Kristeva works to assert. She describes the abject as a perversion that neither “gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts... Corruption is its most common, most obvious appearance. That is the socialized appearance of the abject.” (Kristeva 15-16). Rather than settling on a conclusive *abject*, we should focus on abjection as a space for identity-in-difference, the *différance*, and negation as formative transgressive constructive acts. To dissect what this process may resemble within gaming, I looked at how abjection is represented within other media. What does abjection become when it is used (or someone tries to use it)

in storytelling? How does it function as a liminal space when others try to assimilate that which cannot be assimilated? Abjection is used to create the instances in media where we cringe and feel repulsed, as metaphors in fluctuation. The cadaver within the pages and the corpse on-screen are everywhere, but are they truly representing the process of abjection?

Abjection enables us to explore many aspects of a text, but for my purposes, namely the subject as a structure of meaning. Just as a person may stray from those safety rails to revel within primal instinct to reconceptualize an aspect of their self that is abject, an author/writer/director/composer of a text uses abjection to allow an audience that option of experiencing abjection from within the boundaries what is acceptable. In doing so, they do what Karen Coats describes in "Abjection and Adolescent Fiction." Adopting Kristeva's theory, Coats makes a connection between approaching abjection and the narrative structure of coming-of-age stories. She describes adolescence as "a time of cultivating group identity; socially abject figures are those who cannot seem to manage both the material conditions and habits of the identifications necessary to sustain a position in a social group" (Coats 290). Coats' view of adolescence addresses the use of abjection to describe subjects who live within the boundaries of transformative reflections on their identity. Moreover, she points out that a subject becomes socially abject when they are not able to conform to a larger idea of normalcy determined by their surrounding culture. However, she mostly focuses on the characters within narrative fiction, and while that is an

aspect I acknowledge in this essay, abjection has the capability to reach beyond one discursive site. Using it merely as a form of literary analysis centers discussions only on one subject. Abjection reconceptualizes a self in a space for rethinking meanings and probes a hegemonic understanding of identity (Coats 292). It does not “center,” it negates. Within that negation, new knowledge is processed and othered identities are constructed and performed.

José Esteban Muñoz’s exploration of individuals establishing their identities outside of acceptable societal spaces showcases a process many marginalized individuals experience as they try to construct meaningful connections between themselves and their surrounding communities. Muñoz describes this as disidentification, a process where subjects become “identities-in-difference” (7). Rather than offering a strict definition of identities-in-difference, Muñoz collects instances of minoritarian subjects performing disidentification. As with Kristeva’s theory, Muñoz considers disidentification as transformative, but also transgressive when performed publicly, using Pedro Zamora on *The Real World* as an example. Zamora’s tenure on *The Real World* was fueled by his desire to spread knowledge of young people living with HIV. “He explains, “I know that being on *The Real World* would mean exposing the most intimate details of my life on national television... If I can answer the questions of an auditorium full of fifth graders with inquiring minds, I am sure I could do it on national television” (qtd. in Muñoz 150). Zamora’s activism acts as a counterpublic working as a process to turn the rules of the media aside and

educate the public on a topic that was, for the most part, a very private one. Muñoz explains disidentifications “use-value is only accessible through the transformative politics that it enables subjects to imagine. Counterpublics are not magically and automatically realized through disidentifications, but they are suggested, rehearsed, and articulated” (178). A subject’s identity is given meaning according to the culture which surrounds it. When a surrounding culture oppresses someone from obtaining a meaningful sense of self, they perform an identity-in-difference within omitted invisible and othered spaces. Even more importantly, by performing this abject self publicly, they can create ideological shifts in the way abject social acts are understood. Pedro Zamora’s appearance on *The Real World* is an example of the shift a counterpublic can create when performed on film.

Abjection in film spans multiple uses aside from allowing an othered subject to perform counterpublics for an audience. The other uses discussed here are abjection as an analytical lens followed by the exploration of its use as a creative lens. For the former, Nick Mansfield writes in *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* about the prevalence of subjectivity in modern texts using key theorists in Western culture, such as Kristeva. Using abjection as a lens, he describes the process of determining the “I” of subjectivity as a process, as Kristeva does. Mansfield posits, “We thrust away the evidence of those flows which puncture our skin and make us—despite ourselves—doubt the integrity and autonomy of the selfhood which we identify with the wholeness and

closure we look to our bodies to define” (83). However, Mansfield places much weight onto repelling the metaphorical cadaver, describing subjectivity as the need to define the subject by repelling the abject. For him, the self is determined by maintaining autonomy within those safety rails rather than straying into the abject, the borders, to seek the once rejected other to define the self within a state of flux. He very much buys into the dichotomy instead of working to dismantle it and perceiving abjection as an intersectional process that spans across layers of meaning. Mansfield closes his analysis on the abject by remarking how well Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory lends itself to film, stating that “the ground of Kristevan theory is textuality,” more so than her predecessors, Lacan and Freud. And while I agree that abjection lends itself well to textuality, it is also limited if we only perceive it through producer-centered abject implementation. Remember that the abject cannot be assimilated, so when we write abjection in fiction and repeat this process, creating a genre of the abject, it stops being an abject. It becomes a normal corpse, an expectation, and something we no longer cringe but count on to produce a desired reaction. It becomes the celebrated grotesque. Rather than questioning hegemonic structures, it maintains them.

Another film studies theorist, Tina Chanter, moves closer towards this understanding of abjection, championing it as *the* lens for analyzing films to perform close readings across all aspects of films, film genres, and film theory.

She believes abjection to be a form of critique that subverts societal norms by its mere presence. She writes,

The abject retains a certain slipperiness with regard to disgust, repulsion, revolt on the one hand, and fascination, attraction, desire on the other hand. The political import of films of abjection must not be clearly resolvable as a call to specific actions... In doing so, opening up a political space in which there is room for debate, in which not only dominant identificatory regimes can be contested but also fantasies that legitimate them can be unearthed, and critically addressed. (111)

With abjection, theorists not only read a text, but question the layers that go into producing that text. Doing so provides a deeper analysis of the culture surrounding a genre and work to shift its ideologies by performing counterpublic identities. It's true that films perform and perpetuate certain societal norms that keep an audience within safety rails, but by performing identities-in-difference, even in a controlled sense, an audience is exposed to disruptive performances of gender, race, class, and sexuality. It is a gamble how an audience will react to the material, which may further enforce a life guided by the superego rather than the kind that strays into the abject other; however, Kristevan theory can keep experiencers of film and members of other genres from buying into a social hegemony and reflect upon the producer/creator's choice to

challenge prescribed societal values. This disruption of regimes can be repeated enough so that a representation of the invisible others becomes normative practice.

Whether we're discussing video games in the classroom and the gamification of education, creating and playing a game that will help research a cure for cancer, or questioning the ethics of remotely controlled unmanned aerial vehicles, the social influence of interacting within digital spaces and integrating our lived experiences within those spaces has become part of our normal lives.

Applying Abjection

As previously stated, abjection has many functions:

- It has the experienter construct guidelines/safety rails which keep them within what is acceptable normative practices;
- It seeks to subvert the experienter's dominant societal understandings of normative practices;
- It is an ambiguous space where the experienter may stray into and revel in what they once strived to negate; and
- It is a transgressive/transformative process for a subject to restructure their identity and how they perceive it within established ideologies.

As we saw with Kristeva, Muñoz, Coats, Mansfield, and Chanter, abjection exists in a liminal space between the experienter (subject), the society and

culture surrounding them (object), and the primal instincts or ejected behaviors outside of normalcy (object). But describing it as the sum of three parts limits the understanding, as we are all subject to abjection and various normative practices. While some practices are shared within a culture, discourse, or genre, the experiencers within are unique. Each individual has their own concept of subject-object-object. Furthermore, when we apply this to a gamespace, we further stretch abjection's theoretical scope.

Gamespace, within this research, is a 21st century approach to deconstruction and understanding subjectivity within digital spaces. McKenzie Wark begins *Gamer Theory* describing Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," but rather than seeing an objectively beautiful "whole" world outside of the cave, the gamer sees another game. Gamespace surrounds each aspect of the gamer's (our new subject) reality, so wherever the gamer goes, she interacts with more game objects and designs strategies to succeed (Wark 3). Knowing what worked for the gamer inside one space, they take that knowledge and try to carry over strategies to see what works in new cultural spaces. Sometimes these spaces overlap, and other times pre-constructed knowledge does not integrate as well. Moreover, because Wark focuses heavily on constructed spaces, he pays little focus to marginal spaces between gamespaces. He pays the most attention to allegorithm.

"Allegorithm" is Wark's neologism, borrowed from Alex Galloway, used to describe the rules embedded in a gamespace which make it function. Using EA's

The Sims, Wark calls the game world an allegory of our perceived reality within the gamespace. We sleep, we cook, we read, we go to work and school, we learn how to function in these gamespaces, and we gain experience with hopes of becoming better at these games. Wark writes,

Perhaps a game like *The Sims* is not just an allegory but also an 'allegorithm.' To be a gamer is a slightly different persona to being a reader or a viewer. Lev Manovich: "As the player proceeds through the game, she gradually discovers the rules that operate in the universe constructed by this game." Alex Galloway: "To play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus, to interpret a game means to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel allegorithm)." ...The allegorithm by which the gamer relates to the algorithm produces a quite particular allegory by which gamer and algorithm together relate to gamespace. In a game, any character, any object, any relationship can be given a value, and that value can be discovered. (21)

Whereas an algorithm are those intrinsic rules in a game that lead to success, high scores, a promotion, or a best-selling book, the allegorithm is the "arbitrary" value we attach that helps and motivates us to succeed. The instability and impossibility of following one track, one objective set *safety rail* towards succeeding is beyond our reach because, obviously, while we can be in a gamespace, we are not in a computer game. Therefore, whatever

algorithm/safety rail we ascribe to is always a semblance, an idea, and an abstract, making it an allegorithm. While Wark focuses heavily on the metaphor of games to describe this theoretical lens of understanding, we don't want to get lost in his rhetoric. He has successfully helped substantiate that a subject is influenced by various gamespaces across their everyday life, and their interactions in those spaces are heavily influenced by other outside knowledge and experiences to create value in how they gamer interacts with the world.

Wark echoes a concept discussed by James Paul Gee in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. Where Wark attempts to create a new post-structuralist approach that deconstructs the world as gamespaces, and gamers constitute themselves as following allegorithms to construct their identities, Gee treats gaming, video games, and game "players" as a genre where identity is constructed across gaming's folds. Similar to what Wark wrote several years later, Gee wrote about Semiotic Domains, which are the sites "shared by groups of people who carry them on as distinctive social practices," and where members and newcomers have the potential to become affiliates or experts within these spaces (Gee 24). Furthermore, Gee explains that we "gain resources that prepare us for future learning and problem solving in the domain and in related domains" (24). Semiotic domains are home to words, symbols, other language signs (external design grammars) specific to those spaces which we can take into other spaces. Gee pays much attention to how these help support and transform members within given domains, but not much

is said about what occurs when there is conflict between a subject and a semiotic domain's external design grammars. I believe this is where abjection comes into play with both Wark and Gee. Abjection can be used to describe when a gamer's algorithms don't connect with a gamespace or a player's internal design grammars don't interrelate with a given semiotic domain.

Within the gaming genre, there are many overlapping semiotic domains/gamespaces that encounter each other and either transform and support, create a value, or force a subject to disidentify. There is the character within a game, whose story the player experiences through linear narrative progression. There is the player, whose purpose varies according to their goal; they may seek to finish the narrative, collect all achievements and trophies, complete the game within record time (speed run), or provide entertainment to a live internet audience. There's also the player-character, whose actions are influenced by both the in-game avatar's narrative morality and the player's own real-life motivations. Even beyond this, there is the subjectivity of the game: its programmers, writers, artists, and owners; what do they seek to accomplish and what may interrupt those goals? There are many identificatory regimes at play when *at play*, and these factors often conflict to create an abject experience.

The Abject Gaming Genre - Narrative

In its simplest sense, abjection can be used to describe instances within games that repulse us, "those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside" (Kristeva 1).

The abject has been applied to horror genres because it works well to describe psychological and physical horror. Filmmakers seek out an abject to create grotesque images to terrify (and entertain) their consumers. The same goes for horror video games which add an interactive element to the experience, coining the “survival horror” genre. Players not only watch what happened to the character onscreen, but take part in shared abject experiences from the safety of their own couch. In the *Silent Hill* games for example, series creator Keiichiro Toyama also seeks to create the most interactive abject experience possible in a video game. As an early pioneer of the survival horror game genre, Toyama’s *Silent Hill* features enemies that resemble corpses, some human-like, others humanoid, and others more bizarre in their design. From the onset, the monsters within the games are meant to represent the unconscious fears, guilt, crimes, and revulsions of the game’s protagonists.

In *Silent Hill 2*, the game begins with protagonist James Sunderland reading a letter addressed to him from his deceased wife, Mary, inviting him back to Silent Hill. This immediately creates an abject setting both within James and the player, who has (most likely) never experienced receiving a letter from a deceased lover. James washes his face and lingers on his reflection in a dirty bathroom mirror in an even filthier public restroom, adding layers of physical abjection on top of established psychological ones. The details surrounding his wife’s death are revealed in layers, and we discover that she was bedridden for several years and James was her primary caregiver, causing a strain in their

marriage and their sex life. The enemies in the game represent these repressed emotions of guilt and James' desires, taking the form of hybridizations of sexualized human anatomy (legs, torsos, breasts, and buttocks) and hospital equipment (gurneys, hospital gowns, and straightjackets).

Monster design in video games has been talked about extensively. Diane Carr et al. provide an excellent description of the monster as abject creation in horror games like *Silent Hill 2*: "These horrific creations are compelling and repulsive by turn, thanks to their power to disregard the divisions between the internal and the external, between the self and others..." (151). The appearance of the monsters in *Silent Hill 2* are examples of what we've determined to be the uncanny, objects that too similarly resemble humans, but also symbolize James' trauma, which adds that layer of the abject. The creatures are a manifestation of a *something* that James does not recognize as a *thing*. "A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me." This is the mantra of *Silent Hill*, as the series suggests that the manifestations, the hallucinations, differ from visitor to visitor. The town is the embodiment of abjection, showing only what was already inside the character, those things they had long ejected in order to exist as a subject. However, this portrayal of the abject in gaming, while valid, does not take full advantage of the medium.

What Silent Hill 2 does is no different from what has appeared in film before. The subject takes place primarily within the narrative and the actions of the player do little to affect the plot, besides move it forward. The subject is in the narrative; it is primarily James' subject and not the player's. A better example of the subject permeating between the player and the character exists in Hideo Kojima's Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater. Snake Eater, which merges narrative abjection with interesting gameplay mechanics. Abjection intersects with the game as narrative and player as active subject. In the game, you are special operative Naked Snake on a covert mission. The game encourages stealth gameplay, a staple of the series since the first Metal Gear Solid, so the player may decide whether to engage in aggressive physical and lethal encounters with enemies or to use camouflage and hiding spots to progress through the game's narrative. The option of tranquilizing enemy soldiers is also present from the very beginning, which makes it possible for the player to even avoid killing the game's mandatory bosses. Instead of depleting their red life bar, they wear down their blue stamina bar and eventually tire them out to unconsciousness. (Unfortunately, James did not have this option, so even if you run from his enemies, you still have to kill the boss monsters).

A sequence later in the game takes place after a battle that leaves Snake in a state of near-death as he drags his player-controlled, battle-scarred, and wounded body through a river. He begins to hallucinate that his fallen enemies have returned from the dead with the fatal wounds Snake inflicted upon them.

The act of killing your enemies in video games has been common since we began recognizing pixels as representing living characters to the point where making corpses has become a standard normative practice in games like *Snake Eater*. The abject here represents both Snake's trauma, as these enemies exist within his narrative, and the player's own abject actions. That soldier whose throat the player slit returns with a gaping wound in his neck, spilling blood down his uniform, an enemy's head hangs loosely from the base of his neck and it swings from side to side as he walks, and other gruesome depictions manifest in this grotesque moment in gaming history that both horrifies and fascinates us. Our actions are reflected at us and we come face to face with the horrors we inflicted. This is a better representation of the abject in gaming which incorporates gaming's interactive elements. The something on the edge of non-existence and hallucination that can annihilate us (literally, the hallucinations can attack and kill Snake) if we choose to acknowledge it. The player can then reflect upon this gaming moment and choose to play the game (or any game) differently from then on.

As in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, where not only does our character experience abjection through their trauma, but we ourselves experience it through our assumed expectations of normative gameplay, game creators often seek to assert their own ideologies into an experienter's game-playing. The creators behind *NieR*, and its director Yoko Taro, do this when a player attempts to obtain 100% completion. *NieR* subverts the player's understanding of game

completion, as well as game replayability. In the game, you play as Nier, a man living in a post-apocalypse setting with his daughter who has contracted an unknown illness. You spend most of the game trying to discover a cure and then later rescuing your daughter from the game's antagonist. After the game's finale, like with many Japanese Role Playing Games (JRPGs), you may restart the game with the items and experience you gained the first time around. However, *NieR's* new game plus modes make new choices available to the player that are not available in the first playthrough. It is normal for some gamers to seek to obtain all of a game's hidden secrets and trophies to up their gamer profile's Gamerscore; however, Yoko Taro takes this into account and overlaps the domains of a player, a gaming trophy hunter, and the protagonist Nier's narrative.

Narrative games work with the player plugging in the correct inputs to move the story forward while the game software saves their progress automatically or through a saving interface in-game. One can pretend, as this happens, that an imaginary progress bar records how much is left in the game and picks up where a player leaves off. Players acquire the necessary knowledge to succeed in this virtual world, and they avoid certain acts that will make the game more difficult or result in damning consequences. This is a standard in most games, and even when the narrative is complete and players believe they have experienced the whole world, there are still more known unknowns. There are still secrets hidden to uncover to fully complete everything in the game beyond the narrative. *NieR* makes it so the further along you are in

collecting all your trophies, the narrative progress you've made is erased. So even though the player is closer to their goal outside of the narrative gamespace, Nier begins to lose his memories to the point where he is erased out of the narrative. Based on a final decision the player-character makes to save an NPC, all their previous saved data is erased; so even though they have completed 100% of the game, now 0% of the Narrative has come to pass. In a sense, completing these acts, outside of the primary goals of the narrative, brings the player=character back to the beginning, back to the chora wherein one must learn how to progress through the digitally constructed world, despite the player knowing what there is to know. They are omniscient, overseeing Nier as he relearns all those unknown-unknowns. This is an instance of the game director subverting the player's expectations of achieving a fully completed game. Player's expect to be rewarded when they go beyond the game's requirements; however, Taro weaves that process into his story and overturns that hegemonic normative practice to say trophies and gamer scores are of no importance to him and punishes those who seek out these accomplishments he deems trivial compared to the narrative. To him, they are an abject of the narrative's virtual world that, should they be acknowledged, annihilates all that we worked to accomplished.

When discussing abjection, we cannot ignore the success Kristeva's theories have had in providing a way to discuss minoritarian subjects' place in a culture that views them as *other*. In video games, subversion of normative

practices can go beyond overturning expectations of the medium, and they can become a new discursive site for familiar conversations. Remember that Wark believes one gamespace may interact with another; we've seen this when discussing the overlapping gamespaces between player, game, and game creator. Video games are a discursive site that can seek to challenge normative societal practices for a new audience to make meaning of these concepts within a semiotic domain they are familiar with. However, goals of their creators can never fully accommodate the desires of a player. Because of this, we must look beyond a game's scripted programming to find another layer of abjection; it exists outside of the scope of the programmers, writers, artists, consumers, and the narrative. It is the code that makes up the game to ensure it performs as expected. As Wark stated, we follow the algorithm of the code to succeed, these safety railings are imperfect structures and can give away into the abject reality of the game's programming, the numbers that construct the world, and can have destructive and revelatory properties.

The Abject Gaming Genre – Glitches, Hacks, and Mods

A video game's narrative is a metaphor of what we experience in our daily lives. It reflects ideologies we hold, but makes up only one gamespace. Video game developers work to construct a habitable, functional environment, but these structures fall apart at times. With so much programming done by various people piecing together lines of code to create a whole, it is unsurprising that sometimes these lines do not meet. There are crevices that they sometimes overlook

creating abject experiencers for developers, publishers, players, or the game script itself. Here, I will discuss glitches, hacks, and mods' disruptive properties as different layers of abjection across a gamespace.

Glitches are a near-perfect embodiment of the abject. They occur seemingly at random and without warning. They interrupt normalcy in a game's programmed design, narrative, and a player, character, and player-character's experience. Moreover, glitches appear in a variety of forms from a character model clipping through (passing through) solid objects to losing all saved progress in the game. The latter case, anyone who uses a word processor can relate to. In gaming, glitches, more frequently referred to as bugs, are a wild card. As an abject, they collapse the meaning (structure/safety rails/algorithms) of an object. However, they are also a random occurrence that can create new meanings (algorithms) for the subject. From the surface, a glitch seems like a nightmare to behold, but more aptly put, they resemble chaos in a metaphysical sense. They have no motives and do nothing beyond causing a disruption; whether that disruption is a harmful inconvenience depends on the subject-experiencer. For example, a common bug involves character models and object collisions. Given the specific amount of coding that goes into character models (from bodies to limbs to fingertips to articles of clothing), it has become a given that these objects *will* not always recognize where one ends and another begins. This can lead to a character inadvertently rolling or jumping into a presumably solid object (after all, a wall in a game should work like a wall in real life), and

then clipping through that object into what gamers dub “blue hell.” This space behind the code says “wall,” but is just a digital reconstruction, a metaphor of a wall, and what lies beyond that is empty space where the meaning of “wall” is created. That ambiguous space is the chora where meanings are created; is the player that clips through “walls” trapped in a weight of meaningless, a hallucination that annihilates them or will they revel and find joy in it? *On en jouit*.

Researching how gamers have rationalized these common occurrences led me to what bloggers have termed gameisms, which describes the act of algorithms of a game working against the metaphors which “code” real world meaning to a gamer subject (Bissell, Rhodes, Yang). In some cases, collision bugs result in a gamer being stuck within this outside environment; Blue Hell becomes their prison as they are unable to advance in the game. (What better way to describe social constructs than examining these digital constructs? Digital metaphors acting as Derridean metaphors.) Blue Hell is a subject experiencing an abject, reflecting on the integral structure of the objects created around them. Blue Hell is a labeled *différance*; it is a digital interpretation of the spaces in between created meanings. Othered subjects operate between these boundaries, feeling isolated from a hegemonic understanding that marginalizes them. However, gamer subjects also use these abject experiences to exploit the flaws in a game’s algorithms to their own ends, creating their own metaphors that help them function in that space.

Playing a game means playing the code of the game, understanding its algorithms, and becoming familiar with the system to win. “Winning” is even easier when you can hack the game. As we established by understanding glitches, becoming familiar with the game as a construct opens new experiences beyond how it was programmed. Hacking and modding a game involves changing lines of code to alter its performance. Whereas glitches are an abject for all parties, hacks and mods are an abject for the game. Players become identities-in-difference within the code. Hacking BioWare's *Mass Effect* is a notable example of this. *Mass Effect* gives players the choice to play as a male or female avatar with customizable facial features and skin tone, and through narrative choices allowed them to identify as gay. Unfortunately, men did not have the choice to become romantically involved with any of the male crew members, only women had that option until the *Mass Effect 3*. However, there was a method for hacking the PC version of *Mass Effect* that tricked the game's code into allowing male characters to romance each other.

Both male and female character models in *Mass Effect* share the same code aside from their appearance, as well as programming that codes one as man and the other as woman. Because of this, hackers were able to alter that code; a simple download, copy, and paste into the right folder, and other gamers could do the same. The mod tricks the algorithm of a same-sex crewmate to identify a player's avatar as the opposite sex. This abjection of the game's structure is not the intended coding the game is supposed to perform, but at the

same time, the ability to alter that programming exists in that nexus of game code and allows this to happen. I point this out to not only highlight gamers are aware of games as narrative genres, but as computer software which allows them to create new algorithms. The liminality of this gamespace showcases abjection as a subversive experience, as Kristeva intended to explain. While the risk of subverting a norm may “annihilate” a subject (altering the code can crash the game for instance), the subject sees this as an opportunity to perform an othered identity within this abjection. Hacking a game is the player reveling within the negation of meaning, as code constructs meaning, within the raw primal existence before it was given structure. From there, they can create their own meanings.

Hacks and mods are not an official extension of the game and are always created by outside parties not affiliated with the company that released the game; therefore, it is an abject of the game software. Their content varies from creator to creator, and can be as simple as adding new costumes to adding sexually explicit gameplay. Anna Anthropy writes in *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, “There are a variety of ways in which people change games, and a variety of motivations for doing so. Sometimes they’re akin to crude vandalism... Sometimes they’re akin to clever, subversive vandalism... And sometimes they’re something entirely new, almost indistinguishable from the games that gave birth to them” (70.) They express the desires of the creator, are put on display to the communities of the game they modify, and are sometimes noticed

by the larger gaming industry itself depending on its content. This can lead to the very high possibility that not every person is going to be okay with experiencing a mod. Mods are counterpublics that are always in difference with a given subject (player/gamer) or object (game structure) and can often create conflicts more so than praise. Their existence provides unique commentary on the ideologies within the gaming genre.

The Abject Gaming Genre – Gamer Culture and Genre Studies

The culture surrounding video games is vast, spanning from those who play them, those who write about them, those who make them, and those who make money from them. It's true there is a hierarchy to these roles, much like any community based around commercial products, and there are various names used to describe this community, ranging from the seemingly neutral "game industry" to refer to its business, "game journalism" for its writers, and "gamer culture" which refers to its consumer-centered individual members. For this research, I refer to all of this as the gaming genre, which includes all people involved in gaming. By gaming, I mean the culture that has grown up interacting with and discussing video games from a game player's perspective, which is an important value to establish. In allowing such limitations, emphasis is placed on members of the genre setting the standard, and we can culture map their attitudes and ideologies.

The gaming genre features a wide array of thinkers and creators that set the topics of discussion in this culture. Not only can we rely on gamers

themselves to create counter-culture gaming content that pushes against the norm and sets new standards open to diverse audiences, but the genre also benefits from people on the forefront of this culture. For instance, we have academic work of Ian Bogost and Jesper Juul in game studies, journalists like N’Gai Croal and his articles on racism in the gaming industry, and Anita Sarkeesian’s focus on analyzing games from a feminist perspective; in addition, many self-made YouTube gaming celebrities such as Markiplier or PewDiePie take it upon themselves to voice their opinions on social media and call their viewers to action on topics ranging from charity donations to simply asking them to be more open and kind to their peers. The genre of gaming is part of an expansive gamespace and the ideologies of the genre have been under much strife for quite some time as conflicting ideologies have emerged since its beginnings. Just as a game relies on its coding to work properly, gaming’s members rely on an algorithm to keep things running smoothly. However, the dominant narrative of the gaming genre is beset by those who desire to see more diverse growth. The community struggles with issues of gender equality, racial sensitivity, LGBT acceptance, and what the medium can or should serve to accomplish. It falls mostly onto the hands of the consumers, critics, and independent developers to make ripples that transform into waves of change in the gaming genre.

Gaming holds deeply rooted ideologies, and unfortunately house many of the same discriminations Kristeva faced when she published *Powers of Horror*.

Anna Anthropy touches on this when she writes, “The problem with videogames is that they’re created by a small, insular group of people. Digital games largely come from a single culture... It is not surprising that the games they made looked like their own experiences...” (6). Gaming, like other genres before it, embodies values of their founders; in gaming’s case, it holds the values of the producers, developers, designers, artists, and writers within the very code. Often, there have been cries of disappointment and motions for accountability on the lack of representation of minoritarian subjects in gaming. Because the product reflected the experiences and set limitations of only one gender or race, only those with similar experiences caught on with the gaming genre, leaving others to disidentify with gaming. Moreover, only others that shared the same wealth and connections could produce more of the same content, perpetuating and maintaining gaming’s ideologies. This behavior is not limited to gaming, but is seen in other genres as well. In their collaborative study of genre theory, Amy Devitt, Anis Bawarshi, and Mary Jo Reiff describe genre as being “sites of social and ideological action” (542). As a site of social and ideological action, gaming is home to those who got there first; however, like the previously mentioned modders and hackers, there are discordant individuals that seek to challenge the status quo by presenting objects at the forefront and acting against the pre-established coding of the gaming genre. Anything that sits outside of the realm of the majoritarian gaming subject is a counterculture, an object of the standards set throughout gaming’s origins.

Bawarshi describes genre as having the ability to provide users' access to a community, claiming that "genres are environments within which familiar social actions are rhetorically enacted to understand them as language practices," and he extends, "genres organize and generate discourse communities" (550). But what is it that a gaming genre organizes and generates? Gaming is a discursive site involving video games which house smaller communities; because of this, more openings have been made to accept more members, but the means for doing this is not always in agreement with all its members. For instance, when a game developer announces their first ever gay woman as the lead of their new franchise, a small population is excited by the notion; they have never been able to experience a game in a perspective like this. However, because of the age-old standards of developing a game with a white, straight, and male protagonist, many more members of the gamer culture cry out against these marketing strategies. This is an example of the hierarchy of gaming. Consumer members have little to say when it comes to development members. Before, members never concerned themselves with "outside" social issues like the previously mentioned issues of identity politics. They perpetuate their own ideologies within this established semiotic domain, often leaving little room for minoritarian subjects. More notoriously, gaming's members go to the point of alienating, harassing, ostracizing, and treating people who don't share their ideologies as social abjects. In recent years, Anita Sarkeesian, Zoe Quinn, and Alison Rapp

have been targets of online harassment campaigns because of their public identities as gamers aligned with feminist ideologies.

The most recent issue of contention in gaming has been the rise of the Gamergate movement, causing an even greater division among gamers. Members of Gamergate claim a desire to keep game journalism objective and focused on video games and their content without focusing on the motivations of the creator or the influences for their creative design. More vehemently, they wish to keep gaming away from social justice issues, as they believe they don't have a place in a genre they think should only focus on entertainment. Carolyn Miller asserts the longevity of a genre is determined by its recursiveness, describing them as "typified rhetorical actions in recurrent situations," and she concludes, "members of a genre are discourses that are complete, in the sense that they are circumscribed by a relatively complete shift in rhetorical situation" (159). So, a genre is only legitimate if it is relevant, recurring, and supported by some sort of substantive need by its members. The battle between Gamergate and other members of the gaming genre wishing for more diversity is the cause of two subsets of members creating a shift between gaming's typified rhetorical actions. This shift is common in all genres, as they tend to transform to stay relevant to a cultures' needs. Anthropy goes on to say, "Limiting the creation of games to a small, exclusive group leads not only to creative stagnation, but also the alienation of anyone outside the group... It's a bubble, and it largely produces work that has no meaning to those outside that bubble..." (12-13). What first

began with Sarkeesian and *Tropes vs Women in Games* has since spread to other people targets as social abjects. Zoe Quinn developed her own video game, *Depression Quest*, which she had raised support for from her target audience, receiving praise from this audience as well. It was her desire to see the kind of game she made in the gaming industry today. However, when the game gained traction in the mainstream, she faced criticism and harassment from members of other gaming communities. This is a pivotal moment for gaming as a genre conflicting with abjective abnormal discourses before integrating them into its ideology. It may evolve into “the social turn” in gaming genre’s ethics.

Conclusion – Abjective Academia

In establishing the four guidelines I set for implementing a framework to discuss abjection in gaming, the following three areas of exploration guide us in understanding how abjection disrupts normalized practices:

- The subject is the experiencer/participant of the disruption.
- The object provides the subject meaning.
- The abject collapses the meaning of the object and provides new meaning for the subject.

Simply put, there are three factors that are at play when abjection is experienced: subject, object, and abject. When discussing the role of abjection in academics, there are concepts already established in rhetoric and composition: identification, social construction, and deconstruction all help to describe students whose identities-in-difference struggle with their identities’ indifference to acquiring new

knowledge. Before the social turn, little time was spent on focusing on process, but since then, many students half-learn what they need to pass their classes until hopefully calcifying this new knowledge with praxis. As they learn new terms and concepts, they seek to make connections while educators provide the means to do so. If the student is the *subject*, knowledge is an *object* that challenges the meanings of pre-established “objective” truths. Praxis is necessary to establishing new truths, but as we know, praxis is an ugly, arduous, and disheartening process for many. This cannot be denied as we consider first-generation college students who struggle as they enter the university, as Bartholomae had once said. Praxis is a site of abjection, and video games are a site of multilayered praxis.

The epistemological concept of establishing meaning through visualizing differences is established by Derrida’s “différance” as well as in Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, saying knowledge acquisition would “no longer consist in drawing things together,” that on the contrary, “discrimination imposes upon comparison the primary and fundamental investigation of difference: providing oneself by intuition with a distinct representation of things, and apprehending clearly the inevitable connection between one element in a series and that which immediately follows it” (Foucault 55). If we view writing as a process which establishes difference as well as “writing as thinking” how these meanings interrelate, then learning to construct meaning can quickly become a revolt of being. This may seem like a stretch; however, I don’t believe Kristeva’s

vocabulary should deter us from accepting abjection in the same way we have embraced other post-structuralists. Furthermore, academic knowledge is also a force that if accepted, can “annihilate” what a learner has known since then as truth, as we so often teach when we discuss first generation college students from working class backgrounds. As they discover new concepts of understanding the world at large, older ways of thinking become obsolete, or they at least become subjugated once this veil which obscures critical analysis is lifted.

From my own personal experience, I can attest to the idea that reveling in abject academia has led to a collapse of the previous meaning of my relationship with my family. And I imagine it to be even more difficult for other students without the amount of privilege I hold because of my own gender. Identity politics should not be ignored when it comes to knowledge acquisition or within any other discursive site or genre for that matter. Take this excerpt from “Bi, Butch, and Bar Dyke: Pedagogical Performances of Class, Gender, and Sexuality” where one of the writers shares, “So there’s that uncomfortable pea, planted under my mattress the minute I went back to college. I can talk or write about my working-class past, but I no longer live in it. I have no *real* identity there, and I have no *real* identity in the professional class” (Gibson et al. 540). For some students, who go on to become educators, there is no firm seat at either table available to them, and they must perform a disidentity when necessary; they are abject *somewhere* even if we seek to reinforce that they are not. As identities-in-

difference, they traverse through discourses, literacies, semiotic domains, and gamespaces learning the code of the system as they try to find meaningful connections.

So how does gamespace, abjection, and academia come together in writing studies? Miller and Bawarshi's work on genre, defining it as a recursive site of rhetorical action where knowledge and ideology are constructed and typified, is the key. Discursive sites overlap within academia, and there is no way to avoid that; in fact, we often revel in their overlap and base assignments around their interaction. Students enter the gamespace of the university by relating it to a previous gamespace they are familiar with: high school, junior college, part-time jobs, texting, drawing, writing on social media, and many varied 21st century literacies contain typified rhetorical acts. We bridge the knowledge gap by understanding knowledge acquisition as a process created in difference. We then close that gap by meeting students halfway by placing ourselves in that difference with them. Approaching objects of teaching outside of what we know rather than clutching on to a safety rail lets students' expertise construct a meaning to scaffold their own purposeful identity and knowledge acquisition. Gamespace teaches us this happens across multiple interacting folds and what we do in a classroom is just one of those folds, but in understanding this concept, we apply new means for knowledge acquisition. Whether that means reading new materials, looking outside of the English studies tradition, applying new pedagogy, or experimenting with our own strategies, we must be comfortable

with these rhetorical shifts to allow abjections to occur when they appear and rather than negating them as meaningless.

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