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Masculinities

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Painful Games, Sporting Practices, and Enduring Masculinities

ABSTRACT

This article examines the gendering of gaming bodies through violent performances of geek masculinity in games of pain, that is, digital games designed purposefully to inflict physical injury, such as *The artwork formerly known as PainStation* (//////////fur///// art entertainment interfaces, 2001).

Drawing on game studies, sport studies, and cultural theories of pain, I argue that games of pain treat digital gaming as sporting practice through the inflicting of bodily injury within competitive digital gaming in order to bind geek masculinity with athleticism. I also analyze the pathologized involuntary pain from digital gaming depicted in the speculative media project *Game Arthritis: A systemic study of video games induced diseases* (Matteo Bittanti and IOCOSE, 2011) to explore further how this configuration of pain alternatively genders gaming bodies.

The contemporary popularity of historically geeky interests and representations—including Comic-Con and similar fan conventions, the blockbuster Marvel and other comics-based films, and the massively successful sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007–2019)—demonstrate the recent mainstreaming of geek culture in the United States. The shift away from perceptions of the geek as the undesirable antithesis to the popular figure of the jock as the embodiment of athletic masculinity represents, to quote Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, a “geek cultural revolution” that positions the geek as an increasingly socially desirable subject in popular culture.¹ Mainstream geek

¹ Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 4.

culture, however, is entrenched in a contemporary battle between athletic masculinity and geek masculinity.² While athletic masculinity conventionally favors physical strength and aggression, geek masculinity privileges technical mastery and intelligence. Although often constructed as diametrically opposed, both athletic masculinity and geek masculinity operate through shared elements of toxic, cisnormative, heteronormative white masculinity.³ Particularly in the context of increasing professionalization beginning in the early twenty-first century, esports has emerged as an intersection for negotiating athletic and geek masculinities, as it shores up both cultural privileges attributed to sport and assumptions about the physicality of digital gaming.⁴ Rather than placing athletic and geek masculinities in competition, esports attempts to render the two coherent by treating digital gaming as sport.

Within the context of geek culture, esports, and competing masculinities, this article explores the construction of gendered gaming bodies through experimental gaming practices that Pau Waelder terms “games of pain.”⁵ Games of pain are more likely to be exhibited at art shows, conventions, and museums than commercially marketed, as exemplified by game projects like Eddo Stern and Mark Allen’s *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001), *//////////fur///// art entertainment interfaces’ The artwork formerly known as PainStation* (2001), and Randy Sarafan’s *Tazer Tag* (2005). Games of pain challenge participants to submit their bodies to electronically mediated contests that physically harm them. This harm can include burns, shocks, and flagellation. In what follows, I investigate how games of pain construct an athletic variant of geek masculinity through physical injury that draws on conventions of masculinized sport. As such, my attention to the gendering of games, bodies, and pain follows Betsy DiSalvo’s assertion that we need to interrogate gaming as a site of constructing gender.⁶

I argue that games of pain frame these digital games as contests of physical endurance in attempts to situate such digital gameplay within the idiom of sport—a privileged domain for negotiating masculinity from which digital gameplay is often otherwise excluded. My interest is not whether games of pain constitute sport but rather how games of pain employ sporting practices in negotiating both geek and athletic masculinities. As sporting

2 While there are more diverse communities participating in a broader geek culture, including girl geeks, femme geeks, nonbinary geeks, and Black geeks, this article focuses primarily on white and able-bodied mainstream geek masculinity.

3 Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity*, 5.

4 T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 17.

5 Pau Waelder Laso, “Games of Pain: Pain as Haptic Stimulation in Computer-Game-Based Media Art,” *Leonardo* 40, no. 3 (2007): 239, <https://doi.org/10.1162/leon.2007.40.3.238>. This use of embodied pain in games differs from gamic representations of pain or as feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and failure in playing games. See also Gareth Schott, *Violent Games: Rules, Realism and Effect* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016); and Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

6 Betsy DiSalvo, “Gaming Masculinity: Constructing Masculinity with Video Games,” in *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat: Intersectional Perspectives and Inclusive Designs in Gaming*, ed. Yasmin B. Kafai, Gabriela T. Richard, and Brendesha M. Tynes (Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University Entertainment Technology Center Press, 2017), 114–115.

practices, games of pain mobilize conventional frameworks of athletic sport; they do not question how assumptions about sport and digital games often exclude the latter from the former. So, while esports treats existing digital games as ready technologies for sporting practice, games of pain demonstrate their physicality through a purposeful addition of corporeal pain in order to frame participation as a sporting practice. In so doing, though, they ultimately reinforce the cultural perception of traditional digital games as disembodied and nonathletic.

Games of pain yoke the geek masculinity associated with digital games to the athletic masculinity associated with traditional sport, requiring players to exhibit both to excel. Consequently, games of pain value bodily suffering, via painful digital competition, for the construction of masculinity. My analysis focuses on players' performance of pain, as well as the games' logics of consent and competition, in order to situate the niche practice of games of pain within the broader cultural landscape of digital gaming, geek culture, and hegemonic masculinity. To explore further the underlying logics that render desirable the particular bindings of physical suffering and consent in games of pain, I examine Matteo Bittanti and IOCOSSE's *Game Arthritis: A systemic study of video games induced diseases* (2011), a media project that imagines speculative and fictionalized medical conditions for involuntary injury resulting from digital gaming. While games of pain traffic in enduring masculinized suffering resulting from voluntary competitive gameplay, *Game Arthritis* depicts how hegemonic masculinity's pathologization of involuntary and disabling pain manifests, specifically within digital gaming. Together, they illustrate how different contexts gender and value gaming bodies in pain in the era of geek masculinity.

SPORTING PRACTICE AND TECHNOLOGICAL MASTERY

The rise of esports has significantly increased commercial investment, media attention, and academic investigation in digital games within institutionalized or traditional physical sport formats, particularly in the cases of games such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009), *StarCraft II* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010), and *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017). Existing critical literature on esports has explored fundamental cultural assumptions surrounding sport, digital technologies and embodiment, the professionalization of recreation, and axes of identity and difference such as gender, race, and nation.⁷ Significantly, esports has complicated commonplace definitions of sport that historically excluded digital games from activities that typically receive the

7 See Dal Yong Jin, *Korea's Online Gaming Empire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Nicholas Taylor, "Play to the Camera: Video Ethnography, Spectatorship, and E-sports," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 115–130, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856515580282>; Tom Brock, "Roger Caillois and E-sports: On the Problems of Treating Play as Work," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 4 (2017): 321–339, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016686878>; Gerald Voorhees and Alexandra Orlando, "Performing Neoliberal Masculinity: Reconfiguring Hegemonic Masculinity in Professional Gaming," in *Masculinities in Play*, ed. Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 211–227; and Lily Zhu, "Masculinity's New Battle Arena in International e-Sports: The Games Begin," in Taylor and Voorhees, *Masculinities in Play*, 229–247.

privileged label of “sport.” Such definitions reflect cultural attitudes that view digital games, and computing broadly, as nonphysical and, thus, nonathletic.⁸

The common treatment of digital games as disembodied that is found in both popular and commercial discourses echoes broader views that regard computing technologies as immaterial, such as in the conceptual reduction of computing to the level of screens.⁹ For instance, the explicit desire for user-friendly and intuitive computing interactions among designers and consumers attempts to connect users more directly to virtual experiences by circumventing the clumsy joining of physical bodies with material controllers. Although users are often encouraged to suppress attention to the body in pursuit of the virtual pleasures of computational interaction, the body is always present, whether in the form of the bodies of users themselves or of others depicted onscreen.¹⁰ As T. L. Taylor asserts, “Though it is easy to fall into speaking of computer game spaces as simply virtual and of leaving the body behind, in reality we are continually working through, and with, materiality when we engage in digital play.”¹¹ Critical work in game studies emphasizes that the bodies of players matter to digital gaming.¹²

The perceived nonphysicality of digital technologies exacerbates the feminization and devaluation of computing labor, which are historically connected to anxieties around a decline in masculinized manual labor. As R. W. Connell notes, the rise of information technologies across the workplace in the late twentieth century required “much sedentary keyboard work, which was initially classified as women’s work.”¹³ The term *computers*, after all, previously described the women who operated and programmed computing machinery in the United States during World War II.¹⁴ In response to anxieties regarding the decline of masculinized manual labor, two forms of

8 See Emma Witkowski, “On the Digital Playing Field: How We ‘Do Sport’ with Networked Computer Games,” *Games and Culture* 7, no. 5 (2012): 349–374, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412012454222>; Andy Miah, *Sport 2.0: Transforming Sports for a Digital World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); and Rory Summerley, “The Development of Sports: A Comparative Analysis of the Early Institutionalization of Traditional Sports and E-Sports,” *Games and Culture* 15, no. 1 (2020): 51–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019838094>.

9 See Peter Bayliss, “Notes toward a Sense of Embodied Gameplay,” in *DiGRA '07—Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play* (Tokyo: Digital Games Research Association, September 14–18, 2007), 96–102.

10 Michele White, *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 1.

11 Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 47.

12 See David Parisi, “Fingerbombing, or ‘Touching Is Good’: The Cultural Construction of Technologized Touch,” *Senses and Society* 3, no. 3 (2008): 307–328, <https://doi.org/10.2752/174589308X331341>; Thomas H. Apperley, “The Body of the Gamer: Game Art and Gestural Excess,” *Digital Creativity* 24, no. 2 (2013): 145–156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2013.808967>; Brendan Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); Teddy Pozo, “Queer Games after Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft,” *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 18, no. 3 (2018), <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/pozo>.

13 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 56. See also Sarah S. Lochlann Jain, “Keyboard Design,” in *Injury: The Politics of Product Design and Safety Law in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 86–123.

14 Jennifer S. Light, “When Computers Were Women,” *Technology and Culture* 40, no. 3 (1999): 455–483, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.1999.0128>.

masculinity have become prominent: athletic masculinity and geek masculinity. Both of these ideologies of contemporary masculinity negotiate shifting relations of complicity in and contestation of hegemonic masculinity, by which I mean the dominant articulation of masculinity in the service of reinforcing patriarchy.¹⁵

Modern athletic masculinity exemplifies long-standing norms of hegemonic masculinity, since, as Taylor underscores, “hegemonic masculinity traffics in particular notions of the ideal male form, physical domination, and strength” that the prevailing system of patriarchy articulates in a particular sociohistorical context.¹⁶ Athletic masculinity privileges the fortitude, aggression, and vitality attributed to the physically capable male body, as did the masculinity associated with manual labor.¹⁷ Sport and fitness provide key cultural arenas to perform this form of gender expression—a masculinity hearkening to ancient Greek, Olympic bodies.¹⁸ Indeed, Tim Edwards argues that following the decline of manual labor, “gym cultures and weight-training” became “popular activities for working class men.”¹⁹ The physicality associated with athletic masculinity has historically enabled those subjects to claim dominance over others, since “the masculinity of industrial labour has been both a means of survival, in exploitative class relations, and a means of asserting superiority over women.”²⁰

Whereas athletic masculinity seeks to recuperate a distinct physicality that patriarchy imagines as lost through the rise of computing, geek masculinity developed by rendering computing a masculine arena. Geek culture, closely associated with computing culture, demonstrates how masculinities can cohere around intellectual pursuits and technical knowledge rather than around physical athleticism.²¹ As Taylor contends, geek masculinity favors “highly refined skill and mastery” expressed in “technology, science, and gaming.”²² However, within the patriarchy in the United States, geek masculinity is constructed as feminized and subordinate to athletic masculinity. Notably, however, while “geek masculinity often provides a means for opting out of sports and athletic culture,” the rise of esports has attempted to institutionalize digital gaming as a legitimate sporting practice within existing masculine athletic culture.²³ Esports calls into question cultural beliefs about what constitutes sport, as well as assumptions that digital gameplay is non-physical, while continuing to reinforce sport’s cultural valuation as a cele-

15 Connell, *Masculinities*, 37. See also R. W. Connell and J. W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–859, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.

16 Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 113.

17 Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 39.

18 John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture: A Social and Historical Analysis of Popular Sports in Britain* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 104–106.

19 Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2006), 157.

20 Connell, *Masculinities*, 55; and Betsy Wearing, *Leisure and Feminist Theory* (London: Sage, 1998), 76.

21 Connell, *Masculinities*, 165. See also Christina Dunbar-Hester, “Geeks, Meta-Geeks, and Gender Trouble: Activism, Identity, and Low-Power FM Radio,” *Social Studies of Science* 38, no. 2 (2008): 201–232, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312707082954>.

22 Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 111.

23 Taylor, 111.

brated masculine domain. In so doing, esports seeks to elevate the status of geek masculinity within dominant US culture through appeals to traditional athletic masculinity and sporting practice.

Advocates claim that in treating digital gaming as sport, by tapping into athletic masculinity through the structure of sport and the cultural privileges that it offers, esports culture improves social perceptions of digital gameplay and, by extension, geek masculinity. As Ian Wellard argues, “contemporary sporting practice produces and promotes an environment where displays of traditional masculinity, those which present competitiveness, aggressiveness and toughness, are seen as normal and necessary.”²⁴ Esports similarly draws on some of the dynamics of conventional sport to supplement the geek masculinity of digital gaming with athletic masculinity, such as through the standardization of highly competitive head-to-head formats and tournament structures familiar to traditional physical sport.²⁵

Although dominant culture privileges athletic masculinity over geek masculinity in the United States, geek masculinity is still often complicit with white, cisnormative, and heteronormative hegemonic masculinity. Significant critical attention to geek masculinity has noted how it reproduces many of the pervasive toxicities of hegemonic masculinity more broadly.²⁶ In addition, many of the underlying structures of masculinity central to gaming culture derive from sports culture. These include the violence manifest through similar expressions of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and ableism.²⁷ Through such masculinist norms, gaming culture has elevated the cultural valuation of geek masculinity, proving that its cultural status can shift across time and depending on context. The recent and increasing prominence of esports highlights how multiple forms of masculinity can cohere, despite other tensions, toward a shared project of patriarchal dominance expressed through the contemporary intersection of computing and sport.

EVALUATING PAIN

In contrast to how esports incorporates digital games into established institutions of sport, and thereby require interrogation of commonplace views that have historically excluded computing from athletics, games of pain augment digital games with mechanisms for purposeful suffering in order to make claims for embodied physicality associated with conventional

24 Ian Wellard, *Sport, Masculinities and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 14.

25 An early episode in the mainstreaming of gaming culture trafficked in cultural codes of athletic masculinity to frame competitive video game players as wholesome, athletic, and all-American male youths, as in a photograph featured in a 1982 issue of *Life* magazine. See Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 56–58.

26 See Andrea Braithwaite, “It’s about Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity,” *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (2016): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672484>; Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity*; Megan Condis, *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018); and Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fan-dom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

27 Derek A. Burrill, *Die Tryin’: Videogames, Masculinity, Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 31–33.

sporting practice. For example, //////////////fur//// art entertainment interfaces' *The artwork formerly known as PainStation* pits two players in head-to-head competition through a *Pong*-like game on a digital screen.²⁸ With one hand controlling the digital game, players must keep their other hand on the device's "pain execution unit."²⁹ Failing to block an opponent's shot from reaching the player's goal in the digital game results in the pain execution unit burning, shocking, or whipping that player's hand on the pain execution unit. Furthermore, removal of their hand from the pain execution unit forfeits the game. According to //////////////fur////s' description of the project, the *PainStation* bridges "both the on-screen world and the real world" through pain.³⁰ This rhetorical emphasis on players' physical injury reinforces the conventional view that digital gaming is largely disembodied. For instance, while writing about games of pain, Pau Waelder argues that, in playing most digital games, "[u]sers are detached from their bodies as they project their ego images onto virtual characters."³¹ However, David Parisi argues that Waelder's description of how games of pain refocus attention on player bodies reinforces the incorrect perception that digital game players broadly are actually disconnected from their physical existences.³² Digital game players are always necessarily connected to their bodies. I contend that rather than connecting supposedly disconnected players to their bodies, as Waelder would suggest, games of pain attempt to masculinize digital gaming through a performance of painful, yet skilled, gameplay. These games thus operate as technological sites for performing a joining of geek and athletic masculinities.

By purposefully drawing attention to the bodies of players through sensational mechanics, games of pain demonstrate how pain as a cultural object both foregrounds embodiment and negotiates the symbolic and political significance of embodiment. Games of pain, then, build upon larger cultural perceptions of pain. In her landmark volume, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry explores the political consequences of pain as an individualizing bodily experience and shows how it resists effective representation and communication, rendering it a particular aesthetic problem.³³ This does not mean, however, that representations of pain are not common or meaningful. In a study on representations of suffering male bodies, for example, Kent Brintnall argues that the "glorification of violated male flesh sometimes can recuperate and revalue the male-body-in-pain as some-

28 The original title of the first version of the project was *PainStation* but was changed to *The artwork formerly known as PainStation* following talks with Sony, the company behind the PlayStation console. Later versions of the *The artwork formerly known as PainStation* were developed through 2004. See //////////////fur//// art entertainment interfaces, "PainStation 1," accessed August 30, 2020, <http://www.fursr.com/projects/painstation>.

29 //////////////fur//// art entertainment interfaces.

30 //////////////fur//// art entertainment interfaces.

31 Waelder Laso, "Games of Pain," 242.

32 David Parisi, "Shocking Grasps: An Archaeology of Electrotactile Game Mechanics," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 13, no. 2 (2013), <http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/parisi>.

33 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

thing to be admired, celebrated, and worshipped,” such as in the Christian figure of Jesus.³⁴ As Susan Sontag demonstrates, however, cultural images of pain, death, and dying can circulate for a range of purposes and produce a range of responses, including disgust and outrage, inurement to tragedy, voyeuristic experiences of suffering, and incitement to violence.³⁵ With regard to depictions of Black suffering in the United States, Elizabeth Alexander, Saidiya Hartman, and Debra Walker King have all shown that images of Black bodies in pain have served political ends for centuries, such as reinforcing white supremacist nation-building discourses, driving media consumption, and mobilizing advocacy for social justice.³⁶

Sport studies research on pain and embodiment has further demonstrated that experiences of inflicting and expressing pain are frequently gendered and racialized based upon the nature of the pain and the form its management takes. Generally, the capacity to endure and inflict pain is coded as masculine. Violent sports, in particular, reinforce “the association of strength, body size, and aggression with male success.”³⁷ The pain of conventional masculinized sports, such as football or rugby, is associated with violent competition as well as the ability to withstand injury. Rugby players, for example, are socialized to extend their tolerance to physical suffering in order to continue playing.³⁸ Relatedly, various means of inflicting pain on others can also serve as sites for negotiating gender. Performances of masculinity by male athletes in center sports—the most privileged sports within hypermasculine sport culture, such as football and basketball in the United States—participate in various forms of aggressive discursive and embodied violence. Such violence is often directly against women (through misogyny), other men (through homophobia and denigration of opponents), and players’ own bodies (through physical overexertion), all in order to demonstrate masculine prowess.³⁹

In addition to how inflicting injury genders bodies, performances of managing pain also serve to gender particular subjects. Even in sports in which women participate, women athletes can be socialized into stereotypically masculinized management of pain in order to encourage their willingness to endure physical suffering. For example, adolescent women softball players learn to play through pain as part of their participation in

34 Kent L. Brintnall, *Ecce Homo: The Male-Body-in-Pain as Redemptive Figure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 179.

35 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

36 Elizabeth Alexander, “‘Can You Be Black and Look at This?’: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (1994): 77–94, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7-1-77>; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Debra Walter King, *African Americans and the Culture of Pain* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

37 Kevin Young, Philip White, and William McTeer, “Body Talk: Male Athletes Reflect on Sport, Injury, and Pain,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 11, no. 2 (1994): 178, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.11.2.175>.

38 Lindsay T. Fenton and Robert Pitter, “Keeping the Body in Play: Pain, Injury, and Socialization in Male Rugby,” *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 81, no. 2 (2010): 212–223, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2010.10599668>.

39 Michael A. Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 30.

recreational softball.⁴⁰ In contrast to managing pain in masculinized ways, feminized pain management in ballet results from the pursuit of graceful movement. Here, to perform pain is to perform as if in no pain at all. The management of pain for ballet, which commonly bears white as well as middle- and upper-class cultural associations, is most evident in women dancers' aspirations toward pointe work, a technique known for its intense difficulty and pain.⁴¹ However, as Angela Pickard notes, women ballet dancers "expected pointe work to hurt but that the pain was worthwhile due to the portrayal of lyrical and beauty qualities such as grace and elegance."⁴² The best ballet dancers perform pointe work as if not in pain despite wide recognition of its difficulty, since this ability to perform gracefully as if not in pain at all is conceived in this context as an idealized feminine management of pain.

While these examples demonstrate how particular gendered experiences of pain are celebrated, dominant cultural attitudes toward other experiences of pain can render them perverse, abnormal, and abject. As Tobin Siebers asserts, both pain and pleasure can serve to determine whether particular bodies are socially acceptable: "People thought to experience more pleasure or pain than others or to produce unusual levels of pleasure and pain in other bodies are among the bodies most discriminated against, actively excluded, and violated on the current scene, be they disabled, sexed, gendered, or racialized bodies."⁴³ For instance, normative ableist cultural views often construct those whose physical suffering stems from illness, excessive injury, or disability as victimized by the suffering they must endure.⁴⁴ In contrast, and despite operating as a domain wherein intentional pain holds central value, erotic practices of kink and BDSM (bondage, domination, sadism, and masochism) are largely perceived by normative sexuality as deviant because their practitioners derive erotic pleasure from pain.⁴⁵

As another example of how cultural logics of pain participate in constructing difference and enacting violence in the interest of dominant power, recurring American myths of Black vitality demonstrate how racialized bodies viewed to be naturally inured to physical suffering can serve white supremacy. These myths—which falsely suggest that Black bodies possess distinctive natural physical capabilities, including exceptional strength, reproductive power, and resistance to pain—were prominent under slavery

40 Nancy L. Malcom, "'Shaking It Off' and 'Toughing It Out': Socialization to Pain and Injury in Girls' Softball," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 5 (2006): 495–525, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605283571>.

41 Angela Pickard, *Ballet Body Narratives: Pain, Pleasure and Perfection in Embodied Identity* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2015), 120.

42 Pickard, 115.

43 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 25–26.

44 Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 173.

45 Darren Langdridge and Meg Barker, eds., *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Andrea Beckmann, *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing Sadomasochism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Robin Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

and used to justify harsher working conditions and brutal punishments for Black slaves.⁴⁶ Widespread belief in myths of Black vitality by white Americans also scaffolded racial ideologies central to medical racism, resulting in the inhumane treatment of Black patients. In one mid-nineteenth-century example, J. Marion Sims experimented with surgical techniques to treat vesicovaginal fistulas by operating on enslaved Black women without anesthesia. Later, when performing such procedures on white women, Sims used anesthesia due to concerns that white patients could not endure pain as well as Black patients.⁴⁷ Myths of Black vitality endure in the present, particularly through the fetishized figure of the “invincible black athlete,” wherein Black athleticism is perceived as a natural racial aptitude.⁴⁸ Echoing this, contemporary white medical students have been shown to possess racial bias in how they perceive and thus treat athletic patients’ pain, with the false belief that Black athletes experience less pain than white athletes.⁴⁹

Cultural conceptions of pain suggest that pain’s signification—its perception, value, and consequences—is historically and culturally specific, even though it can appear to be solely an effect of natural physical embodiment.⁵⁰ Games of pain draw on codes of corporeal suffering vital to masculinized athletic sport by relying on aggressive forms of pain, such as whipping, burning, and shocking. However, some critics dispute the centrality of pain to player experience. Waelder, for instance, asserts that “[t]he purpose of these games is generally to enhance game play with haptic stimulation.”⁵¹ Consequently, he characterizes the ability to “withstand pain [as] not an essential part of game play.”⁵² Similarly, Parisi subordinates painful gameplay elements by treating them as fun obstacles rather than primary sites of competition. He suggests that games of pain “use pain effects to help inhibit the successful completion of game objectives. . . . Pain becomes fun and amusing, experienced aesthetically rather than instrumentally, only within the controlled environment of the game apparatus.”⁵³ In contrast, I argue that physical injury is more than just an additional obstacle or aesthetic enhancement in these games. To suggest that pain is present simply to “inhibit” success is to ignore the ways that physical suffering is fundamental to how these games construct and players perform both geek and athletic masculinities, especially since masculinity has long been associated with using the body to

46 John Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 169–186; and Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 43–48.

47 Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes*, 176–177.

48 Hoberman, 187.

49 Kelly M. Hoffman, Sophie Trawalter, Jordan R. Axt, and M. Norman Oliver, “Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs about Biological Differences between Blacks and Whites,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 16 (2016): 4296–4301, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1516047113>.

50 Lisa Silverman, *Tortured Subjects: Pain, Truth, and the Body in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 21.

51 Waelder Laso, “Games of Pain,” 239.

52 Waelder Laso, 240.

53 Parisi, “Shocking Grasps.”

dominate others.⁵⁴ Inflicting and enduring physical pain explicitly frames this specific form of digital gaming within the idiom of conventional sport, transforming a geek pastime into a sporting practice and a proving ground to make claims for athletic masculinity via the gaming body.

CONSENT AND COMPETITION

Another game of pain, Eddo Stern and Mark Allen's *Tekken Torture Tournament*, combines the fighting game *Tekken 3* (Namco, 1997) with electroshock feedback.⁵⁵ *Tekken 3* is a standard two-player head-to-head fighting game in which players control digital avatars locked in combat until one emerges victorious by depleting the other player's health bar, thereby knocking their opponent out. *Tekken Torture Tournament* modifies this gameplay by equipping players' arms with bands capable of electrocuting them. Describing *Tekken Torture Tournament*, Stern and Allen explain that "willing participants received bracing but nonlethal electrical shocks in correspondence to the injuries sustained by their onscreen avatars" as they competed against each other and often onstage before a spectating audience.⁵⁶ In so doing, *Tekken Torture Tournament* translates injury to the player's onscreen avatar into physical injury to the player's body.

The game's titular reference to "torture" draws on colloquial practices that describe difficult, uncomfortable, and painful experiences as "torturous." In contrast to this broader conceptualization of torture, however, I follow Scarry in understanding torture as a particular arrangement of bodies, power, and pain conceived as lacking consent from the tortured party. I apply this rubric to *Tekken Torture Tournament* to tease out how consensual competition governs the gendering of physical suffering in games of pain.⁵⁷

In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry investigates how physical injury, violence, and suffering contribute to the literal and ideological unmaking of social worlds. To do so, she extensively compares two specific experiences of pain: torture and war. Within this juxtaposition, Scarry focuses on their bounded separation from everyday life, as torture and war are "two events in which the ordinary assumptions of culture are suspended" for the purposes of inflicting injury to achieve domination.⁵⁸ While both entail injuring bodies, Scarry emphasizes an important distinction between the two that hinges on "consent": in war, the persons whose bodies are used . . . have given their consent over this most radical use of the human body while in torture no

54 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 9.

55 Eddo Stern, "Tekken Torture Tournament," accessed August 30, 2020, <https://eddostern.com/works/tekken-torture-tournament/>.

56 Stern.

57 For torture, see Liz Philipose, "The Politics of Pain and the Uses of Torture," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 4 (2007): 1047–1071, <https://doi.org/10.1086/513022>; J. Jeremy Wisniewski and R. D. Emerick, *The Ethics of Torture* (New York: Continuum, 2009); and Silverman, *Tortured Subjects*. For gamic representations of torture, see Derek Burrill, "'We're Going to Have to Do Things That Are Unthinkable': Masculinity/Games/Torture," in Taylor and Voorhees, *Masculinities in Play*, 23–36.

58 Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 18–19.

such consent is exercised.”⁵⁹ No one consents to the unidirectional injury of being tortured, Scarry explains, whereas war is a bidirectional activity involving opposing parties consenting to engage in a contest to injure each other. It is worth noting that these conceptualizations of war and torture are distinctly abstracted models and not rooted specifically in lived histories. War, for instance, is typically more asymmetric and less systematically consensual among all involved and affected parties than Scarry suggests, as the killing of civilians known as “collateral damage” demonstrates.⁶⁰ Military drafts, furthermore, complicate Scarry’s conception of war as universally consensual among those involved. Acknowledging this abstraction, I read games of pain through Scarry’s framework in order to underscore how different configurations of pain, consent, and competition participate in constructions of masculinity.

For instance, discussions of games of pain often emphasize the consent of players who participate in them. Waelder notes that players participate “of their own free will.”⁶¹ Similarly, Patrick Crogan describes participants as “volunteer players,” emphasizing their choice to subject themselves to games of pain.⁶² This attention to consent foregrounds similarities between games of pain and Scarry’s model of war, rather than torture, since both war and games are broadly imagined as voluntary activities separated from ordinary life. Thus when surveying influential definitions of games—including the writings of Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Bernard Suits—Jesper Juul notes that voluntariness is commonly imagined as a constitutive element of games albeit one that is difficult to prove.⁶³ Ultimately, Juul goes on to question what defines true consent and brackets whether consent need be a necessary component of defining games, since he describes absolute consent as undeterminable.⁶⁴ Furthermore, as Aaron Trammell demonstrates, such authors of influential conceptualizations of games and consent, who operate within a white European philosophical tradition, consistently exclude malicious and taboo activities—such as torture—from their celebrations of play.⁶⁵ In so doing, they render illegible how play has been used as a practice to harm and subjugate others, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

59 Scarry, 21.

60 Lisa Silverman demonstrates that Scarry conflates contemporary models of torture with historic practices of torture. See Silverman, *Tortured Subjects*, 20.

61 Waelder Laso, “Games of Pain,” 242.

62 Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 138.

63 Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 30. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1949; New York: Routledge, 2008); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001); and Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

64 Juul, *Half-Real*, 31–33.

65 Aaron Trammell, “Torture, Play, and the Black Experience,” *G/A/M/E: Games as Art, Media, Entertainment* no. 9 (2020): 33–49, <https://www.gamejournal.it/torture-play/>.

Rather than debate whether consent is ultimately a requisite component of games, I am interested in the conceptualization of consent in defining bounded voluntary activities, such as games and war, in order to explore the values and meanings attributed to voluntariness itself. As Scarry elaborates, “War is in the structure of its activity a contest.”⁶⁶ The contest in war, Scarry suggests, is to out-injure the other party into submission.⁶⁷ While identifying war as inhabiting the form of the contest, however, Scarry underscores its seriousness by distinguishing it from other activities that also inhabit the contest structure but lack the same gravity, such as games.⁶⁸ Like war, games of pain are imagined as a kind of voluntary injuring contest, though with distinctly different stakes.

In understanding games of pain as voluntary contests similar to war, competition becomes a mechanism to demonstrate masculine dominance within a framework of meritocracy. In *Tekken Torture Tournament*, for instance, players must endure physical pain they inflict on each other in order to continue to play and, hopefully, win the digital fighting match in *Tekken 3* in order to demonstrate both superior athletic and geek masculinities. As in most sporting practices, the logics of competition in games of pain motivate the athletes to discipline themselves in order to improve and demonstrate dominance, whether that be over others or against the previous performance of the self.⁶⁹ As Christopher A. Paul argues regarding the broader toxic meritocracy of contemporary gaming culture, however, meritocratic success in gaming is attributed to individual capacities and skill that become the metric for competitive social ranking. Such metrics show little regard for the structural systems that circumscribe individuals with different privileges and resources for success.⁷⁰ In particular, Paul notes how esports and tournament play rely on this central premise of purportedly demonstrated and earned domination through technical mastery as an expression of geek masculinity.⁷¹

For games of pain, this technical domination is coupled with physical domination through inflicting and enduring pain, since, as Waelder observes, “[p]layers will be motivated to prove to themselves and to others (their opponents and the audience) their ability to overcome pain.”⁷² In *Tekken Torture Tournament*, for example, to be able to demonstrate geek mastery in the digital game *Tekken 3* requires being able to withstand suffering inflicted by one’s opponent via electroshock as a performance of athletic mastery. Consenting to inflict and to endure physical injury as part of games

66 Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 85.

67 Scarry, 63.

68 Scarry, 82.

69 Juha Heikkala, “Discipline and Excel: Techniques of the Self and Body and the Logic of Competing,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 10, no. 4 (1993): 397–412, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.10.4.397>.

70 Christopher A. Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 2.

71 Paul, 3.

72 Waelder Laso, “Games of Pain,” 242.

of pain draws on the gendered practice of violent sport; as Wellard notes, “participation in violent sports, especially those with a potential for injury, reinforces and naturalises notions of masculinity that value physical dominance.”⁷³ Games of pain mobilize the masculinization of injuring force, as participants must weaponize their gaming bodies to injure opponents and endure physical suffering themselves.⁷⁴ Hence in *Tekken Torture Tournament*, a player’s ability to withstand bodily suffering is a requisite component for being able to electroshock their opponent as they continue playing. Taylor notes how esports players also endure bodily pain, such as from headaches and eye strain, yet that pain is rarely legible to or seen as physically demanding by audiences.⁷⁵ Consequently, such suffering rarely challenges the perception that digital gaming and esports are not physically demanding or that they are not violent in analogous ways to traditional masculine sport.

As events that work out athletic and geek masculinities through voluntary and visibly violent competition, games of pain are typically played in front of audiences. Indeed, the visibility of pain is crucial to the spectatorial dynamics that accompany games of pain. Described by Crogan as participating in a kind of “cruel theater,” the spectators to these games witness and amplify the competitive dynamic that serves to determine dominance.⁷⁶ Although winning a game of pain may bring a participant recognition for their masculine dominance, even losers can still benefit from their participation in the injuring contest. For in addition to determining winners and losers, games of pain often result in physical wounds that players and spectators can see. As Scarry contends, wounds can function as a visible means of memorializing past experiences of pain that can be shown to others.⁷⁷ Waelder notes that after competing in games of pain, players can often be found “displaying wounds with pride,” regardless of whether they ultimately won or lost.⁷⁸ As evidence of voluntarily playing at injuring, such displays draw on the symbolism of sporting injuries as battle scars from athletic competition; as Wellard explains, “Physical displays which result in injury provide evidence of masculine performances away from the field.”⁷⁹

Even when players lose, physical wounds evince their physical strength, mental fortitude, and their consent to play at digitally mediated injuring. These corporeal markers serve as masculine and masculinizing trophies, badges, and achievements that participants can show others to prove their toughness and their willingness to subject themselves to high stakes digital games. Waelder, in fact, identifies a kind of masculinist sorting function at work around these wounds that resembles other body modification cultures: “Just like piercings or tatoos [*sic*], the wound in the hand identifies

73 Wellard, *Sport*, 15.

74 Michael A. Messner, “When Bodies Are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 25, no. 3 (1990): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1177/101269029002500303>.

75 Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 39.

76 Crogan, *Gameplay Mode*, 141–142.

77 Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 16.

78 Waelder Laso, “Games of Pain,” 239.

79 Wellard, *Sport*, 15.

that person as being a (regular- to hardcore-) *PainStation* player and therefore belonging to this particular group.”⁸⁰ In this way, the wounds players endure from games of pain serve to cohere a body modification community that recognizes the value of these injuries. They understand such wounds as evidence of players’ willingness to inflict and endure pain and of the competitive and hybrid performances of athletic and geek masculinities that they function to memorialize.⁸¹

Furthermore, Waelder’s use of “hardcore” to describe this exclusive group of players gestures to and reinforces gendered assumptions underlying the distinction between hardcore and casual gaming. This distinction divides and differentially values the shifting landscape of commercial games and their imagined players.⁸² Shira Chess explains that “while ‘hardcore’ games tend to be expensive, difficult to learn and master, and time-consuming, a ‘casual’ game is cheap, easy to learn, and can be played for variable amounts of time.”⁸³ This distinction operates to gatekeep, determining who can be recognized as a legitimate participant in gaming cultures, primarily through a gendered logic that privileges hardcore games as masculine. Gamers who identify as hardcore primarily construct their masculinized identity through the exclusion, denigration, and dismissal of feminized casual games and casual gamers. In such discourses, games marked as “casual” are often linked to newer and more accessible game formats, such as mobile games, and greater racial and gender diversity among player-participants.⁸⁴ Hence the term *casual* works to feminize, devalue, and exclude from gaming precisely those games and players that historically dominant male players perceived as threats to their gaming culture as they understood it.

Although conventional usage of *hardcore* describes a masculinized and privileged subset of commercial digital gaming, games of pain associate hardcore play with the willingness of players to inflict and endure

80 Pau Waelder, “An Enhanced Duelling Artefact: PainStation and the Role of Competition in Video Games,” in *Extending Experiences: Structure, Analysis and Design of Computer Game Player Experience*, ed. Olli Leino, Hanna Wirman, and Amyris Fernandez (Rovaniemi, Finland: Lapland University Press, 2008), 163–176.

81 For body modification communities, see Jessa Lingel, *Digital Countercultures and the Struggle for Community* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

82 See Mia Consalvo, “Hardcore Casual: Game Culture Return(s) to Ravenhearst,” in *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2009), 50–54, <https://doi.org/10.1145/1536513.1536531>; John Vanderhoef, “Casual Threats: The Feminization of Casual Video Games,” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 2 (2013), <https://adanewmedia.org/2013/06/issue2-vanderhoef/>; Aubrey Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); and Amanda C. Cote, *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

83 Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 13.

84 Erica Kubik, “Masters of Technology: Defining and Theorizing the Hardcore/Casual Dichotomy in Video Game Culture,” in *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, ed. Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 135–152. For gamer identity, see Adrienne Shaw, “Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (2012): 28–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410394>; Chess, *Ready Player Two*; and Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

pain in competition to demonstrate not only technical mastery—or geek masculinity—but also physical prowess and athletic masculinity. In describing the wounds from games of pain through the language of hardcore play, Waelder echoes the exclusionary and masculinizing logic of hardcore gamers and amplifies it to champion games of pain as a particularly distinct category of digital gaming, one that can be distinguished from traditional digital gaming through the explicit incorporation of physical injury. Such hardcore play demands a willingness to mark the gaming body with wounds and scars as potentially lasting memorializations of masculine gameplay. These corporeal traces of pain can then be shown to others as proof of participation and demonstration of the hardcore masculinity such sporting practice demands. In battling over claims to geek and athletic masculinities, then, games of pain contend that participating in consensual, competitive, and visibly violent digital gaming is not to be done casually.

INCORRECT PAINS

As “hardcore” contests of domination, games of pain traffic in a variant of geek masculinity that has been infused with athleticism through digitally mediated inflictions of physical injury and suffering. Pain here is not only visibly violent and aggressive but also consensual and competitive, which is how it helps incorporate games of pain into the traditional framework of hyper-masculine sport. In contrast to this masculinized celebration of pain, other forms of injury from gaming are treated as aberrant and pathologized. With that in mind, I now turn to analyzing Matteo Bittanti and IOCOSE’s speculative media project, *Game Arthritis*, in order to unpack further the matrix of pain, consent, and competition central to games of pain and the gendering of gaming bodies in geek culture, demonstrating how knowingly consenting to potential injury informs the valuing of resulting pain from digital games.⁸⁵

Game Arthritis takes the form of a report that documents several fictional physical injuries resulting from prolonged digital gameplay. The various conditions presented are all collectively categorized under “game arthritis.” For each of the medical conditions that *Game Arthritis* includes, the report provides a textual description of the fictional condition, references to actual news coverage and academic papers used to corroborate the plausibility of the fictional medical condition, and a pair of photographs: a waist-up photograph of a patient dressed in a white medical gown and a close-up of the injured body part alongside a gaming device in front of sterile white backgrounds. In presenting fictional medical conditions such as Atari Skinning, WiiMote Shoulder Dislocation, Xbox Hypertrophy, and WASD Syndrome, *Game Arthritis* highlights where bodies join technological devices in order to underscore the potentially harmful consequences that players may encounter in order to play.

By situating *Game Arthritis* alongside games of pain, I show how bodily pain is differently valued depending on the conditions of physical suffering,

85 Matteo Bittanti and IOCOSE, *Game Arthritis: A systemic study of video games induced diseases*, accessed August 30, 2020, <https://www.gamearthritis.org>.

including the performance of its experience, its management, and logics of consent. In contrast to the voluntary wounds significant to games of pain, *Game Arthritis* demonstrates, however, that not all wounds resulting from digital gaming are valorized, which highlights the precise configuration of consent that undergirds the celebrated masculinized affliction in games of pain. Like games of pain, *Game Arthritis: A systemic study of video games induced diseases* draws explicit attention to the corporeality of digital gaming via injury, but it recognizes the role of the body in all digital gameplay, not merely digital games that foreground intentional infliction of pain. Whereas games of pain mark themselves as a hardcore subset of gaming that claims athletic masculinity by distinguishing itself from conventional, allegedly nonphysical digital gaming, Bittanti and IOCOSE's project focuses on how all digital gaming places demands on players' bodies. In this way, *Game Arthritis'* understanding of the physicality of digital gaming converges more with esports' treatment of digital gaming as intrinsically physical. By rendering conventional gaming as itself always a site of potential injury and wounding, however, *Game Arthritis* presents the gaming body through experiences of pathologized pain. In mobilizing pathologized pain in this way, the project subsequently reproduces pervasive anxieties around gaming as an inherently harmful activity.

That *Game Arthritis* names each fictional condition after a gaming device attributes blame to the device itself for the injury. As the introduction reads, "The conformity of interfaces produces deformity," which suggests that digital gaming devices are the injuring, and thus offending, parties to player bodies.⁸⁶ This is reinforced in the textual description of each condition, which includes causes and symptoms, prognosis and treatment options, and estimated statistical information regarding prevalence. For instance, the description for WASD Syndrome states, "The impossibility of bending several fingertips can cause acute pain in the subject. Such condition is the result of a prolonged, repetitive fingers' pressure on four specific keys, W-A-S-D, hence WASD Syndrome."⁸⁷ Photographs illustrating the injuries further suggest the devices' culpability in injuring players. Both photographs of each condition clearly foreground the gaming device, thereby visually emphasizing the potentially harmful demands that digital gaming devices exert on player bodies.

In this way, *Game Arthritis* underscores the physical dimensions of digital gaming and pathologizes the gaming devices, bodies, and injuries it depicts. It does so by mobilizing the discourse and visual rhetoric of medicine and disease, since the fictional report characterizes the conditions as consequences of "the psychopathology of ludic societies."⁸⁸ Thus, *Game Arthritis* reinforces historically persistent attitudes that suspiciously view digital gaming as harmful to those who engage in it.⁸⁹ This is amplified

86 Bittanti and IOCOSE.

87 Matteo Bittanti and IOCOSE, "WASD Syndrome," *Game Arthritis*, accessed August 30, 2020, <https://gamearthritis.org/post/5586514685/wasd-syndrome>.

88 Bittanti and IOCOSE.

89 Faltin Karlsen, "Analyzing Game Controversies: A Historical Approach to Moral

by the fictional report's suggestion that powerful institutions and individuals are actively suppressing information about these medical conditions. Drawing on investigative journalistic rhetoric reminiscent of muckraking and exposés, the fictional report claims that "game companies do not want to talk about [game arthritis]. Clinicians and dermatologists do not want to discuss it. Labs refuse to run tests. And yet, thousands of players manifest similar symptoms. Thousands of players feel real pain in their bodies. Affected subjects are not delusional."⁹⁰ The report then elaborates that unspecified "authorities" have silenced this research, suggesting a collusion among gaming companies and medical professionals to cover up how gaming devices harm, injure, and wound unknowing player-victims. This insinuation further reinforces the cultural image of digital gaming as pernicious.

Games of pain do the opposite. As contests of athletic and geek masculinities, they rely on conceptions of hardcore voluntary competition wherein players knowingly embrace the potential for wounds that symbolize aggressive athletic masculinity and memorialize their consent to compete violently. In so doing, games of pain perpetuate conventional perceptions of digital gaming as not physically demanding through the framing of games of pain as a specific category of digital games requiring athleticism compared to digital games more broadly. In contrast, *Game Arthritis* recognizes that gaming bodies are always manifestly physical. Bittanti and IOCOSE's project does not make particular claims to recognize any digital gaming practice as categorically more athletic, hardcore, or masculine. Rather, the project depicts unsuspecting players as being victimized by the bodily pain they experience.

Consequently, whether players know about potential injuries they may receive from digital games before participating nuances the role of consent in the valuing of wounds. *Game Arthritis* suggests that the fictional victims presented in the report could not consent specifically to the wounds they received, despite seemingly choosing to play digital games. The report's discussion of a cover-up that suppresses public knowledge about these potential medical conditions underscores how players are presumably unaware that pain or injury could result from digital gaming. The injuries presented in the report are wounds for the wrong reasons and are thus not prized. Their lack of value is communicated through the serious or stoic expressions of the subjects exhibiting their unanticipated injuries in *Game Arthritis*, especially in comparison to the joyous and celebratory expressions of the subjects proudly showcasing their battle wounds in *PainStation*. This contrast further emphasizes the importance of injury from consensual competition—and consent with knowledge of potential physical injury—in the visible performance of "hardcore" athletic masculinity that games of pain mobilize.

The wounds in *Game Arthritis* are incurred by gaming bodies unaware of the wounds that may befall them, hapless victims of harm enacted by mali-

Panics and Digital Games," in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, ed. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderöth, and Ashley ML Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 15–32.

90 Bittanti and IOCOSE, *Game Arthritis*.

cious gaming technologies and gaming companies. The socially valuable wounds of games of pain, however, as the trophies of “hardcore” contests of visibly violent competition by consenting parties cognizant of the physical suffering they will endure, enable particular practices and players of digital gaming to make painful gains in masculinity at the intersection of athletics and geek culture.

CONCLUSION

In the era of mainstream geek culture, games of pain such as *The artwork formerly known as PainStation* mobilize both athletic and geek masculinities through voluntary subjection to potential injury in competitive gaming. Along with esports, games of pain represent one configuration of bodies, technologies, and practices that negotiates the historical constitution of and fluid relations among competing masculinities. Games of pain require players to prove not only their prowess in the geek domain of gaming but also their athleticism, as they must inflict and endure physical injury in order to dominate opponents. In contrast to esports, which require reassessing conceptions of traditional sport in order to integrate digital games into existing sport institutions, games of pain reinforce historic attitudes that treat sport as physical and digital games as disembodied. Games of pain do so in their suggestion that digital games with deliberate mechanisms for corporeal injury are the digital games that specifically require athleticism. Games of pain encourage the aggression and violence associated with athletic sport and hegemonic masculinity as supplements to the technical mastery of digital gameplay. In this manner, they allow consenting players to test both their geek and their athletic capabilities in heated competition against others. Thus, games of pain construct a hardcore subset of geek culture by defining a domain of geek masculinity that also demands athletic masculinity from gaming bodies.

Although games of pain are an experimental niche practice in gaming culture, analyzing how designers and players value specific conditions and experiences of pain in digital gaming opens up broader questions about the construction of gender in contemporary, mainstream geek culture. The prized, masculinized form of physical pain resulting from games of pain requires a precise configuration of consensual competitive violence and domination in digital gaming at the intersection of geek and athletic masculinities, in contrast to the abject involuntary pain from digital gaming depicted in *Game Arthritis*. The unintended injuries that players endure in conventional gaming are regarded as pitiful and pathologized under this schema. Games of pain make apparent the force of athletic masculinity in geek culture, as they celebrate the aggressive and violent physical trauma of both self and opponents in the process of competitive gameplay. This coming together of digital gaming and athleticism through digitally mediated contests of physical injury lays bare the suffering that such enduring masculinities inflict on gaming bodies in geekdom.

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