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Television & New Media

**Critically Encountering Exer-games & Young Femininity**

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**Dr Jessica Francombe-Webb** is a lecturer in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Bath, UK. Her work is focused around the interdisciplinary interrogation of the practices of the body and identities that are included and excluded—in relation to health, body size and appearance, gender, social class, race, (dis)ability across the lifespan—and the way this is understood in relation to the media and technology. Principal publications include 'I cheer, you cheer, we cheer': physical technologies and the normalized body. *Television & New Media* (2010), *Methods that move: a physical performative pedagogy of subjectivity. Sociology of Sport Journal* (2014) & *Learning to Leisure: Femininity & Practices of the Body. Leisure Studies* (2013).

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## **Abstract**

This paper builds upon previous research into the Nintendo Wii game “We Cheer” through qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of young girls *and* their playing experiences. I argue here that this multi-layered approach is important as it allows for exploration of the nuances between representation and everyday lives in order to analyse the complexity and contradictions related to the girls’ heterosexy embodiment and the process of becoming female in a (digital) culture still largely dominated by the socio-cultural constitution of slenderness. Throughout the analysis I aim to demonstrate the way in which the girls’ engagement with “We Cheer” was mediated by their own embodied sense making and work on the self. As such I focus on the partial stories that the girls tell about their own embodied femininities in order to advance studies of media reception in ways that are arguably unique to interactive exer-games such as “We Cheer.”

**Key Words:** Media, Exer-Games, Femininity, Body Image, Embodiment

The emergence of exer-gaming, or as Millington (2012) contends the birth of bio-games, warrants scholarly attention not only on the basis of the health and fitness prerogatives that are promoted but also in terms of the ways in which certain subjectivities are either enabled or constrained; considered more desirable than ‘others,’ when they are ‘played’ with as part of digital embodied leisure time. Critical media analysis of the discourses associated with a range of media—television, film, music video—now including computer games, points towards the discursive normalisation of particular subjectivities that can have consequences for individual wellbeing and how individuals come to know themselves. Within this paper I am especially interested in the normalisation of a distinctively (hetero)sexy and slender feminine subjectivity within computer games and the impact on a group of 12-13 year old girls’ embodied experiences.

From interdisciplinary perspectives scholars have sought to interrogate the pervasive normalisation of certain body politics, focusing on the ways in which these are commonly reconstituted not only throughout government policy (Wright, 2009) but also across computer games, magazines, literature, films, reality television programmes and new social media (Chen 2010; Drew 2011; Gibbins and Taylor 2010; Marwick 2010; Rodrigues 2012; Sukhan 2012). Whilst addressing the representations of the body that coalesce across media, these

analyses also advocate multi-layered approaches that examine the important nuances between “conclusions about the potential impacts of media images on audiences . . . [and] the activities and interpretations of audiences themselves” (Millington and Wilson 2010, 31). These methodologies centralise audiences’ everyday lives with the aim of analysing the “local production of subjectivities in techno-mediated environments” (Gajjala 2014, 219). As such, I am compelled to extend my previous work in this journal by contending with the complex assemblage of audiences and their interactions, meaning making and their living in and through these techno-mediated environments (Courtis *et al.* 2012; Humphreys and Orr Vered 2014; Taylor 2009).

Within this paper I look to build upon previous textual analysis (author) of the Nintendo Wii game “We Cheer” that explored the dominant gendered, sexualised, classed and raced representations of femininity. To do this I analyse qualitative data gathered from workshops with twenty 12-13 year old young girls, whereby the girls talked about their everyday lives, played the computer game and commented whilst others played. Based upon the lived experiences of these young girls *and* their playing experiences, I seek to explore their engagement with a media text in conjunction with the girls’ own embodied experiences of femininity. Reworking Millington and Wilson (2010, 38), I was driven in this instance to understand better contemporary femininities, and this meant understanding “that there are no timeless or universal certainties in how people experience media consumption” as part of their leisure and everyday practices of the body, “nor are there definitive linkages between these realms”. “There are however, potential sites of articulation” (Millington and Wilson 2010, 38-39) that our methodologies should seek to interrogate and from which our theoretical understandings of the body in contemporary culture can be developed.

This paper explores the girls’ movements away and towards the game “We Cheer” and the images and movements they encountered in order to analyse the complexity and contradictions related to the girls’ everyday embodiment and the process of becoming female in a culture still largely dominated by the socio-cultural constitution of slenderness.

### **“I Cheer, You Cheer, We Cheer”: Conceptualising Computer Games**

I argue here that the Nintendo Wii game “We Cheer” is an example of many media technologies that can be described as mechanisms of governance, regulation and intervention that reproduce public pedagogies focused on the individual and often their body. To understand these assumptions about the role/function of exer-games requires an examination

of the way that media technologies such as this make available certain possibilities whilst regulating and delimiting others (Brady 2011). The contemporary moment in general, and the emergence of exer-games in particular, is imagined on an epochal shift in the role of the state “from authoritarian government to individual responsibility; from injunction to expert advice; and from centralized government to quasi-governmental agencies *and the media*” (Sender 2006, 135 my emphasis). It is within this context that active, exer-gaming, has emerged as a form of governing at a distance (Rose and Miller 1992). This is not to suggest that the conjuncture is marked by less government but rather a shift to governance wherein there is a new and invigorated emphasis on the responsabilisation of individuals. Governance then, entails the maintenance, direction and creation of a regulated ‘freedom’ in which individuals conduct themselves in a manner that appears freely chosen but is at the same time in allegiance with the shifting agenda of authorities and the multiple implications of a market-led economy (Rose and Miller 1992). In other words, this neoliberal form of governance, within localised contexts, works in tandem with (global) capitalism but “has moved beyond the economic dimension of maximized profit-making into the socio-cultural domain of subject formation” (Chen 2010, 243).

The resulting minimum interventionist agenda and the associated practices “depend on a range of pedagogies that affect contemporary life at both the level of the individual and the population” (Wright 2009, 2), these pedagogies are (re)worked, (re)produced and disseminated more widely through various forms of media. These media—or as Ouellette and Hay (2008) contend these cultural technologies—offer directives for the management of everyday life and the body. Films, television programmes, self-help books, magazines, the radio and computer games operate as mediated forms of governance that are literally shot through with representational politics. Following Wright (2009, 12), these sites “have the power to teach, to engage ‘learners’ in meaning making practices that they use to make sense of their worlds and their selves and thereby influence how they act on themselves and others”. For Henry Giroux (2001, 2004) it is imperative that our engagement with pedagogic sites transcends institutional sites of learning and instead is located within our wider leisure activities—such as when playing “We Cheer”. In looking more closely “at the *constituents and particular relations and moments of pedagogies* within spaces beyond schools” as Emma Rich (2011, 70 emphasis in original) urges us to do, I look to illustrate how physical cultural practices related to the body and young femininity (re)produce public pedagogies that speak to the complex interplay of political, social and technological relations. Taking into account the moments of learning about “physical practices, expressions and corporeality” (Rich 2011,

65) thus requires a departure from theories of media effect and socialisation towards critical engagement with ways that the discursive resources available to young girls across popular culture are used to make sense of their bodies and their subjectivities in localised ways (Rich 2011).

What is increasingly evident in the present is the way that this sense making and work on the self is predominantly focused on the body and its appearance, shape, size and conduct; we are in an era of intensive ‘learning the body’. This requires an understanding of the body as a political space and thus an understanding of the pedagogy that is directly related to the body. The concept of biopedagogies brings together Foucault’s notion of biopower and pedagogy in order to conceptualise the normalising, regulating, governance of populations “through practices associated with the body” both within and beyond schools (Wright 2009, 2). For this paper I am particularly interested in the way that this incursion for individuals to “*understand* themselves, *change* themselves and *take action* to change others and their environments” is encouraged across a range of popular media and new technologies (Wright 2009, 2 emphasis in original see also Miah and Rich 2008). As such, I hold together an analysis of young girls’ body work that is at once localised (a privatised and personalised process of becoming) and related to wider culture (as the game “We Cheer” is afforded an authority and a power to intervene and reiterate hierarchically produced knowledge of the female body, its contours, and performance within an obesogenic climate) in order to discern what embodied knowledges are worth knowing for young girls.

## **Methods**

I employed a multi-method approach that was based upon a two part strategy of inquiry; this involved textual analysis of the (re)presentations of the female body across media products such as computer games and then layering these alongside data about the ways these images were experienced, enjoyed, rejected and negotiated by those who are centrally positioned: young girls. Throughout my data collection with twenty 12-13 year old girls, “We Cheer” became a conduit to explore these intersections between popular culture and their embodied femininity. In a practical sense my analysis of the game “We Cheer” brought to the fore some key issues about the performance and maintenance of the young, slender, heterosexy body and these preliminary findings shaped the research activities I encouraged the girls to participate in.

Therefore, alongside media analysis this paper draws on data collected during a series of workshops that were held at Franklin School (a pseudonym) which is a private (fee paying) school in the West of England. The workshops ran over the course of a school term and they were described to the girls as being focused on the media and body image. Franklin school embraced this focus and supported the collaborative critical inquiry element that formed part of the research protocol (Francombe 2013a). Within the weekly workshops numerous media resources were introduced and these were utilised to engage the girls in their own critical inquiries about the body (Oliver 2001). But in this paper I centralise the computer game “We Cheer” and how I used the still and active images and associated sensations and movement as a form of research method that, like Oliver (2001), shed light on the girls’ experiences but also encouraged them to critique the meanings they attributed to their bodies. “We Cheer” was employed variously throughout the workshops and I encouraged the girls to not only play the game but articulate how they felt whilst playing/watching, to comment on the images and actions they were engaging and even to write down their observations. The workshops were animated and dynamic spaces in which the girls playing the game and even those watching would dance and sing along to the routines and there were fervent discussions that often aligned with their increased physicality. With Oliver and Lalik (2004), the girls’ voices remain at the forefront of my interpretations, the intention being to retain their multiplicity and ensure that others may interpret them differently and offer alternative ‘readings’ of their lived realities.

Through this multi-method approach I question the relation of power and embodied becoming as girls play exer-games and I was able to collect rich, descriptive data about the “way representation exists in a complex relation to lived experience” (Pavlidis and Fullagar 2014, p. 52). Moreover, I was able to initiate conscience raising activities whereby the girls took responsibility for analysing the game and thinking critically about the images, narratives and movements being deployed and through the creation of posters they began to articulate the operation of power as materially and discursively produced. These methods of data collection—that are aligned with cultural studies and physical cultural studies’ approaches—elicited data that is full of nuances in relation to the girls’ localised and multifaceted engagement with the biopedagogical.

Within what follows I will examine the complicated and at times contradictory ways that this group of girls played and I will consider the implications of these experiences for cultural and sociological analyses of media-based leisure (Chambers 2012). As Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014, p. 52) have written elsewhere, within this paper I “aim to demonstrate the

values of experience as shaped by the discursive and digital realm of culture, in unravelling the complexities” of girls playing “We Cheer.” However, I firstly want to reflect on *my* own encounters with, and analyses of, “We Cheer” in terms of the lines of dominance and axes of power that are (re)produced (Johnson *et al.* 2004).

### **“I Cheer, You Cheer, We Cheer”: Analysing Computer Games**

A comprehensive analysis of the media-text of “We Cheer” has been published previously (Francombe 2010), thus this section of the paper is intended to provide an overview of the key points that emerged from my time playing and analysing the game.

Created by NAMCO BANDAI GAMES Inc for the Nintendo Wii, “We Cheer” is designed to offer an ‘authentic cheerleading experience.’ Central to success when playing this, or any of the games for the Nintendo Wii console, is the movement of the player and it is this interactivity that differentiated it from other products on the market at the time. The Nintendo Wii captured the public imagination because it transformed computer gaming from a sedentary act to one that filled living rooms as bodies ran, hurdled, played tennis, golf, bowled and danced. Within “We Cheer,” this prerequisite for movement is accompanied by player engagement with different dancing stages, narratives that include giggling cheerleaders dancing to impress groups of young males and negotiating dressing rooms and gymnasias in order to sculpt a body that appears like those others in the cheer squad. The player inhabits the role of the cheerleader who, at various points, competes, supports or works out. Once your avatar is suitably dressed and coiffed you are ready to enter the different cheerleading events and begin to dance along to the choreographed routines. The aim being to use the wireless Wii-motes as virtual pom poms, following the sparkling arrows and moving at the same time and in the same way as the cheerleaders. For every correct sequence of moves a ‘Cheer Point’ is won and following the accumulation of sufficient points you are able to progress through the rounds of competition and onto different stages at different events. As you can imagine this requires a repertoire of forms of body work and as I played I became aware of not only how much my arms ached from throwing them into different shapes and poses but also how invested I became in the ‘glitz and glamour’ of the preparation and performance. Marwick (2010, 253) identifies that body work encapsulates “fitness, hair, makeup and fashion and is generally seen as a feminine activity.” With the exception of makeup—which is permanently and unalterably etched on the faces of the avatars—“We Cheer” calls for these forms of work on the body: from altering the skin tone



of the cheerleaders (this is by no means unproblematic [see Francombe 2010]), selecting your avatar's hairstyle, hair colour and their 'cheer' uniform, to dancing to support the male sports teams and even opting to sacrifice the winning of 'Cheer Points' in the quest to burn calories in the Workout mode.

Technological advances have ensured that the playing experience is no longer abstracted and delayed but rather is highly stimulating, animated, fast moving and, in the case of motion sensitive games, the images are "near photorealistic" and represent or require "real life movements and physics of humans and objects" (Bryce and Rutter, 2003, 1). "We Cheer" is one such game where the experiences of dancing, as they are initiated and represented "through digital culture," lead to the transformation of images "from fictional or metaphorical signs to simulations with ontological status" (O'Riordan, 2007, 239). The result is the cultivation of *the* female body that is distinctively gendered: a narrow reading of femininity that is heterosexy. Shields Dobson (2011) discusses the distinctions between the terms 'hetero-sexy', 'sexualised' and 'sexualisation' and I am guided by her definition and utilisation of hetero-sexy specifically. She writes:

I use the term 'hetero-sexy' instead of 'sexualised' or 'sexualisation', to draw attention to the fact that it is a specific type of sexualisation to which most people refer when they describe young feminine representations and feminine performativity itself in contemporary culture as 'sexualised'. The limited way in which 'sexiness' is currently presented, meaning that slim, young, appropriately groomed (Pitcher, 2006), white, able bodies continue to be fetishised, is a central critique of cultural 'sexualisation' made by authors such as Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie, and Ariel Levy. Thus, it is not just that femininity is 'sexualised', but that it is aligned with a specific gendered and heterosexual aesthetic, derivative of both 'traditional' femininity — pink, delicate, decorative cutesy, and so on (Brownmiller, 1984) and mainstream heterosexual pornography — overly large artificial looking breasts, high heels, excessive make-up, revealing clothing or clothing which draws attention to sexual and erogenous zones (Levy, 2005).

Whilst the cheerleaders represent conventionally conceived, fetishised femininity, their bodies can also be understood as a way of demonstrating one's investment in the self. The body is held to account in terms of its appearance, shape, size, (in)activity and the slender body becomes evidence of an individual's self-investment. Comparatively the

‘other’—the ‘flabby’ body in need of discipline and the nemesis of slenderness—is deemed to be in need of surveillance and incentivisation. Nowhere is this more apparent than one analyses “We Cheer’s” Workout mode and the circulating discourses of health, obesity and physical activity. It is the incorporation of the workout that leads me to locate “We Cheer” as a form of exer-game and in this regard I am informed by Marwick’s (2010, 252) work around “body culture media”. Specifically, the Workout mode befits a “genre of popular culture which positions work on the body as a morally correct solution to personal problems” (Marwick 2010, 252). In line with this, “We Cheer” locates the incentive for reinvention with the individual, the aim being to get into shape and sculpt a body that is acceptable to, and aligned with, the other members of the ‘cheer squad’.

“Governing less through the dissemination of ideology” (Ouellette and Hay 2008, 472) and rather more through freedom to choose, exer-games such as “We Cheer” operate as seductive biopedagogies that, crucially, intersect with embodied experiences of femininity. These new interactive technologies create subject positions that are at once fleshy and digital (Harambam *et al.* 2011) and whilst “We Cheer” does not venture into the prescription of girlhood per se, through the body’s movement, modification and management, the game’s (bio)pedagogic moments emplace (Pink 2011) the young female body within a system of powerful discourses pertaining to its deportment, behaviour, demeanour and performance (Rose, 1989). Subsequently, my focus herein is the subjective ways in which femininity was embodied by a group of young girls who played, and watched each other play, “We Cheer.”

This study of embodiment is about digital culture(s)—culture more broadly—and “experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of being-in-the-world” (Csordas, 1999, 143). Experiences are thus manifold as young girls seek understanding, as they negotiate and struggle with and through feelings of frustration, recognition, resignation, acceptance, enjoyment and pleasure. Rather than search for the ‘truth’ of “We Cheer,” this paper focuses on the partial stories that the girls tell about their own embodied femininities and their becoming girls in order to advance studies of media reception in ways that are arguably unique to interactive exer-games such as “We Cheer”. Like Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014), I embrace the multiple and explore the girls’ embodiment of the subject position of a “We Cheer” cheerleader; their desire to assert alternative subjectivities whilst complexly embodying and maintaining a connection to representations of heterosexiness and slenderness. Through exploring the girls’ discernment of particular body knowledges the analysis that follows is reflective of the multiple ways the girls engaged with the game as they sought to embody multiple relations of self. I have conceptualised this multiplicity in

terms of their material and discursive movements *towards* and *away* from “We Cheer”: the images, music, narratives and actions.

### **Femininity, Representation & Embodied Becomings**

Throughout this analysis I aim to demonstrate the way in which the girls’ engagement with “We Cheer” was mediated by their own embodied sense making and work on the self. In so doing I bring to the fore the circulation of embodied knowledges that the girls utilised to understand the images of the avatars and their engagement with them. In order to do this I take as a starting point a particularly instructive data extract that highlights the intricate assemblage of meanings about the on-screen and off-screen body that were evident when the girls played the game for the first time:

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| Lucy | [upon seeing the cheerleaders on the screen] So does that mean that people with small boobs aren’t allowed to play? |
| Kate | No it means that people that are that skinny shouldn’t have big boobs   |

Within the context of media and body image workshops it is perhaps not surprising that the girls’ remarks were directed towards the size and shape of the body. However, the girls’ comments reveal their attempts to make sense of, and grapple with, the multiple interpretations of the cheerleaders that are possible when they are first confronted with these images. Not unlike Lucy and Kate, Charlotte demonstrates the nuanced ways that the girls embodied the biopedagogical subject positions available to them. She comments that “*the cheerleaders are skinny, pretty, show a lot of skin and do suggestive dancing. I feel watching that I should be a lot skinnier*”. Charlotte measured herself against the hyper-real, hyper-stylised femininity she encountered on the screen in a way that made her evaluate her body and stimulated her wish to be “*a lot thinner*” because she had been “*looking at really skinny people.*” Similarly, Alexia and Monique’s discussion sheds light on these intricate dynamics whereby the girls worked on and surveyed themselves. In their becoming cheerleaders they subjectified their own and others’ bodies:

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| Alexia  | <i>It’s saying that you have to have legs that are like this big</i> |
| Monique | Very thin thighs   |
| Amelia  | <i>Like you Monique</i>  |

Monique      No I don't

This dialogue between the girls, though not exhaustive, reveals the fluidity with which young females consider their own femininity as it borders that which is re-established throughout popular (digital) culture. Taken together these extracts illuminate the relational knowledges that are produced as biopedagogic imperatives (the way the girls use the game and its imagery to *know* and *learn* the body) intersect with the girls' everyday practices of the body (their embodiment of femininity see Francombe 2013b) and this provides the context from which the following analysis develops.

*Thinking through Tensions: Thin Thighs and Bodily Excess*

While the girls' game-play reaffirmed some of my original interpretations of "We Cheer", others were problematized by their criticality—their movement away from the game. In this sense then the girls, at times, actively refuted the game's images and ways of thinking about the female body and at times they reconfigured their understandings based on *a priori* knowledge. Simply put, although it was evident that the girls engaged with the game's images, movements and narratives and referred to these as they told stories of their own bodies and subjectivities, they also resisted some of these images, discourses and stylisations of self:

Aqua            Their thighs are too thin

Lucy            You you're always talking about thighs Aqua  
[Girls laugh]

Thinking through these tensions, this extract brings to the fore the way that the girls engaged with the circulating power relations that shape the discursive, digital realm and their own embodiment—specifically the size of the avatar's thighs and their own. But, through Aqua's proclamation that "*their thighs are too thin*" we get an insight into the girls' critical engagement and their movement away from the subject position of the cheerleaders. Within each of the workshops I found that the girls' movements and their observations were accompanied by detailed and lengthy talk about the images on display as well as their re-enactment and repetition of certain bodily actions. Interestingly, and in line with Aqua's comment, the girls often deemed the female cheerleader to be an unrealistic representation of the female body:

Me            What do you think about the girls that you are seeing?

Group        They're skinny

Lottie        Argg their legs are too long

Kate          They're so skinny

Robin        Their heads are too big and their legs are too long

Nina          Blonde and Barbie

Kate          They are so skinny

The cheerleading body met vehement critique and this was readily and articulately expressed throughout the workshops. However, there were ebbs and flows in the direction of the dialogue throughout some of the workshops as the girls danced along and contemplated their own physicality: their own interactivity. They were either overtly critical of the images presented to them or they themselves exclaimed a need to be '*thinner*', in some instances their appraisals of the cheerleaders were even underscored by their appreciation that it was '*the prettiest one*' that they '*always go for*' (Lottie). The slippage between these relations of the self were epitomised when Aqua discussed the dance moves that they performed as part of the game:

Me            What do you think about the moves?

Aqua        They're very provocative. They keep sticking out their bums  
[performs the move], *I love that move*

Aqua's awareness that the game was inviting the player to perform dance moves that were provocative incited an angry affective response, but this can only be appreciated as a counter narrative—a movement away from the game—in as far as it is situated alongside the competing understanding that she '*love[s] that move*'. Aqua's heterosexy performativity in this instance may be seen as part of her negotiation of the "complex spaces between 'real', 'unreal', 'playful', and 'parodic' identities" (Sheilds Dobson 2011). What is more, it was the provocative performance of the move—the movement of her own body—that seemingly provoked alternative affective responses from Aqua. There were many other similar instances within the workshops whereby the girls' active bodies and the sensations and embodied feedback they received shifted or reshaped the discourses among them. The girls did not reflect upon their contradictory evaluation of the moving image when compared to their

affective responses to their own performativity of the cheerleading self, nevertheless away from the game, India and Paris did express a cognizance that what they *should* think was different to their everyday experiences and practices of the body:

- India            I'm ok with mine [body], but like we've all been told not to submit to peer pressure but [interrupted]
- Paris            You do
- India            Sometimes you just can't help to think what if?
- Paris            Yeah that's what I mean, I'm always like, what if I was like this, what if I was like that?

The girls' dialogue points towards the multiple forms and multiple sites of body work that intersect with their own thoughts, feelings and experiences. It also brings to the fore the way that schools, parents and popular culture more generally attempt—sometimes ineffectively—to encourage young girls' positive relationships with their bodies and appearance. Girls have, in effect, been provided a language of critique—through media literacy classes and postfeminist forms of address—that enables them to identify and name the unrealistic expectations of female bodies, including those on display in “We Cheer”. Roxy, for example, seemed to condemn the fact that *‘everything you choose you will, it will never look real’* and, putting their language of resistance to work, the girls began to problematize not only the body itself but also the cultural climate that permitted this type of portrayal:

- Lottie            But I suppose they have to be [thin] if they are going to get people to buy it
- Robin            They wouldn't actually get a real girl doing this
- Kate             Yeah
- Aqua             Yeah I know. They all look fake but they look so pretty
- Lottie            But they had to make them look perfect
- Kate             Because no one would want like a fat one

Kate's comment that *‘no one would want like a fat one’* highlights that even at the age of twelve and thirteen girls are informed about the commercial desirability of the thin body

and a gendered culture of slenderness. However, the extent to which this language of critique and resistance was embodied is also accentuated within the very same extract. For when the girls' own bodies moved alongside the digital image, when their own embodiment was centralised, their criticality was remiss. Accordingly, the girls' assessment of our contemporary climate, however insightful and informed, was still framed by Aqua's contention that *'they look so pretty'*. The process of becoming cheerleaders entailed that the girls grappled with the thorny interplay of politics and pleasure (Pavlidis and Fullagar 2014) as they moved away and towards "We Cheer." They experienced the pleasure and pain of the discursive representation of the female body, for instance, they often talked about not liking the overly slender females yet they readily compared themselves to their friends and noted their desire to be *'really skinny'* (India). With Sheilds Dobson (2011), I argue that the analysis so far has revealed the need to "complicate straightforward readings of hetero-sexual material . . . when viewed in the context of female self-production" and within a neoliberal context where individuals "free to choose their paths towards self-realization . . . are *constantly at risk of getting it wrong* (Smith Maguire and Stanway 2008, 63-64 my emphasis)."

Within the UK more broadly, and this localised context specifically, the exposure of excessive flesh is one key way of 'getting it wrong.' As I said at the outset, the socio-cultural constitution of slenderness is still very much privileged and this may go some way to explaining the contradictions and tensions that underpinned the girls' playing experiences as they criticised the overly slender bodies of the cheerleaders and yet themselves desired a thin ideal. Although the underweight body was tethered alongside these contradictions, the overweight body was certainly not considered in the same nuanced way. This was brought into fruition when the girls entered the Workout mode; they were suddenly very secure in their assumptions about the bodies they saw on the screen. Within this platform the girl becomes the workout instructor and encounters a variety of 'other' bodies that are looking for help to lose weight. The Franklin School girls' reaction to the bodies that appeared on the screen was stark in terms of their explicit differentiation between 'desirable' slenderness and 'inappropriate', excessive corporeality:

Kate	Oh my god. Why is he so fat?
Lucy	[singing] Fatty fatty bom bom
Lottie	Eeww he's sweating

Aqua           Urgg he's got moobs [deposits of excess fat on a man's chest]

Kate            I think that's a bit harsh having a fat person asking to . . . doing the exercise

Lucy            [repeating aloud the game's audio mockingly] I'm not good at doing things by myself

Lottie          She's tiny compared to him . . .

Nina            Oh my gosh I feel so sorry for the fat man he's so slow

Lucy            Do I have to do the moves?

Me              You're supposed to be squatting . . . yeah copy them

Roxy            So they actually get you to work out?

Aqua            Is the second person being the fat man?

Robin          [currently playing as the second person] I hope not

Lottie          One of you guys is the fat one, the fat guy, and the other one is the thinner

Lucy            I'm the thinner

I read “We Cheer’s” Workout mode within a framework of health (Phillipov 2013) through which excessive flesh is re-established as unacceptable and representative of a body that is not fit, and tellingly, does not fit in alongside the bodies in the cheer squad. Difference then is digitally experienced, mediated, conversed and embodied. The flabby ‘other’ body was negotiated and apprehended by the girls as being a figure of fun and empathy with low self-esteem (Gill 2008; Sender and Sullivan 2008); it was an undesirable subject position and one the girls did not want to ‘play’. The language deployed by the girls at this point “highlights the moral dimensions of public health discourses” (Phillipov 2013, 379) and although they responded variously to the overweight and thin bodies in the Workout mode, they overwhelmingly supported the inclusion of this within the game. The neoliberal discourses of healthism and individualisation triggered by the Workout mode served a legitimising function that inoculates, in some sense, against the more critical discourses of the representation of the female body—in this game and the media. The girls noted the healthy



message the Workout mode sends and the ways that it might aid individuals to lose weight—an action that was thought necessary given the out of control body:

It's quite good that they have a workout mode (Kate).

If you lose all those calories I'm going to do it (Alexia).

Good that you actually get to work out and the fat person is asking to learn to exercise (Roxy)

At no point does “We Cheer” explicitly delineate the inclusion of a workout as a health imperative. Still, within a society focused on slenderness, health has become conflated within weight-centric discourses and “We Cheer” is yet another physical cultural context that is marked by these ideologies. The girls’ stigmatisation of the *fat guy* “can be seen as part of the mechanism for reinforcing and privileging slimness in a culture that promotes health at one size” (Mansfield and Rich 2013, 358). Within this matrix of power, knowledge and expertise “We Cheer” can be seen to be mobilising macro biopolitical agendas (Macleod *et al.* 2003) on (ill)health, obesity and physical activity via the representation of techniques for the care of the self and governance of the girth (Coveney 2000). The effects are localised, lived experiences of neoliberalism that manifest themselves in comments such as:

If they made an effort they would be OK but they just . . . (Paris)

Reading into the silence that lingers at the end of Paris’ comment, is the suggestion that non-conformity is not only recognised through conduct and behaviour, but through the body. Those that fall short of engaging in self-regulative practices are ‘othered’ and “stigmatized as failing themselves and their fellow citizens for failing to take up, and be responsible to their duties” (Fusco 2006, 75). The rhetoric of effort, in this sense, points towards a ‘freedom’ to choose to exercise and workout and this operates as a depoliticising tool that fails to attend to inequitable social structures that impact everyday lives and health and physical activity practices (Rich 2005).

### **Critically Encountering “We Cheer”: Concluding Comments**

Within this paper I have presented the multiple layers of interpretation that result from a research project that combined media analysis and the experiences of playing a computer game for those centrally represented—young girls. I did this in order to shed light on the

ways in which young girls embody multiple relations of the self within (popular) cultural discourses of femininity and body shape/size. Media analysis such as this, that is focused on the everyday impacts of biopedagogies, needs to take into account the multiple embodied negotiations young girls make as they play exer-games and the complex assemblage of their engagement alongside their “personal experiences, their own embodiment, their interactions with other ways of knowing, other truths and operations of power in relation to the knowledge produced” (Wright 2009, 14). Within this paper I have begun to consider the relationality between everyday experiences of femininity and girls’ embodied interactions with the computer game “We Cheer.” My analysis has attended to the ways in which the girls participate in, or contest, the forms of representation they encounter and the way they work on and maintain their bodies as gendered, raced and classed ways (a more detailed exploration of how race and class affect girls interpretations is ongoing see for example, Francombe and Silk 2015). Throughout I have conceptualised this as their movements towards and away from the game and I have drawn out their affective, embodied becomings. This multi-layered analysis has been imperative because it has revealed the unpredictable and contradictory nexus between representation and female self-production. Rather than juxtapose these analyses I have found more analytic purchase in considering the interrelations between tensions and I hope to have shown the complex ways in which the game’s imaginaries border the lived experiences of young girls and how this recreates a powerful context in which bodies are being imagined, learned, managed and worked upon.

Through the gameplay the girls engaged with the evocative images on display and moved their bodies in a quest to replicate the cheerleaders’ actions and win ‘cheer points’. Fascinatingly, they seemed able to critically engage with the image they saw on the screen, but once they were active, once their bodies were dancing, this criticality was somewhat dispersed and they became conscious of the shape, size and appearance of their own bodies; they surveyed themselves and desired a more slender physique; they embraced movements that accentuated their (hetero)sexuality and they lamented the appearance of excess flesh and read the overweight body as unhealthy and undesirable. Selective representations of gender, (hetero)sexiness, the (un)healthy, (in)active body became intertwined and were given legitimacy whilst others were denigrated and “We Cheer” became a conduit through which these distinctions were articulated—therefore performing a pedagogic function that shaped the fabric of experience (Giroux 2000; Rich 2010).

The ‘instructional’ or ‘educational’ force of popular culture was felt when the girls discussed “We Cheer.” Amongst their dialogue, particularly those snippets presented in this paper, there are some telling moments in which the game was afforded an authority and a power to intervene in ways that oscillated with wider health and physical activity policies that were then localised and inscribed on the girls’ own bodies. Certain ‘truths’ about the female body; its contours and its physicality were challenged through the multiplicity of the girls’ experiences, but they were also affectively reaffirmed and sanctioned (Giroux 2004) as the visual and kinaesthetic offered ways of knowing that spoke to neoliberal values of self-sufficiency, responsabilisation, care of the self and effort. The tempered relationality of representation and embodied becomings reaffirms a methodological imperative to employ multiple forms of data collection when exploring contemporary media such as computer games.

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