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Female Gamers:

How Designers and Marketers have Missed the Mark on a Key Demographic

Abstract

Traditionally, video gaming has been viewed as a pastime enjoyed primarily by men, despite reports that the proportion of females that play video games has grown—to nearly *half* the gaming audience, some sources claim. Despite this growth, our social understanding of the concept of video games remains rife with the image of predominantly male themes, including over-sexualized and scantily-clad female characters. While some games manage to find a delicate balance of content that appeals well to women, most games that do not fit the generic masculine idea are either casual and simplistic or carry strong gender lessons for female children—“be a teacher, learn to cook, design clothing, be a make-up artist,” and so on. Adolescent and adult females are left in the lurch, so to speak, forced to choose from gaming options that are largely either sharply masculine or sharply feminine.

Current literature has only briefly examined women’s feelings on the issue, and is often based on assumptions about supposed differences between men and women that simply make gaming a “man’s hobby.” Unsurprisingly, game designers and marketers respond only to societal pressures and beliefs in the interest of running a successful business. However, a flawed understanding of the female gamer demographic may be stifling both industrial growth and women’s entertainment. This paper examines the gender stereotypes that exist around video games, outlines the potentially offensive characteristics of current games that deter women from playing, challenges arguments regarding cognitive gender differences and ability, and suggests ways gaming industry professionals can appeal to female gamers (and non-gamers) without offending their sensibilities or ignoring their interests.

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Introduction

Video gaming is still rather young, having been recognized in the population as a common source of entertainment only as recently as the 1980s. Since then, gaming has expanded from public arcades and simple home amusement to something with a much higher degree of portability and accessibility. Games are not simply on consoles and PCs, but on handheld gaming devices, mp3 players and cell phones. Most importantly, games are beginning to appeal to a wider demographic, making it a potential source of entertainment and relaxation for people of all ages, backgrounds, and gender identities—just look at the introduction of the Wii, and the diverse audience Nintendo has attempted to reach. The common misconception that video games are championed largely by the teenage sector is no longer necessarily the case—though it may have been when gaming first began, as teens are often cited as early adopters of new technologies. In fact, one recent study of two online gaming sites found that over 60% of players were older than 19, which suggests a largely adult clientele (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003).

Video games have since become a significant addition to the entertainment market, and some already lucrative corporations like Sony and Microsoft have experienced incredible success and financial gain with their leading innovations in the gaming industry (PlayStation and Xbox, respectively). Arguably, having a good understanding of potential customers and their interests plays an enormous role in the development of any product, especially ones with huge potential dividends for top-selling companies like the aforementioned. However, most researchers, designers and marketers appear to have greatly over-generalized and under-developed their understanding of female gamers (and non-gamers)—if they acknowledge females much at all.

While some researchers have attempted to examine the true demographics and characteristics of those who play video games, the societal assumptions upon which some very stark gender biases and misconceptions have been based have not been closely examined. In my research paper, I plan to challenge the weak female persona that society, designers and marketers have used in attempting to understand what women want in a video game (which assumes, of course, that all women want the same thing to begin with). I believe that game developers generally assume that females do not play video games enough to warrant consideration in the development process, leading to games which pander directly to the sexuality and opinions of the heterosexual male. A very strong quotation from an article by Royse et al (2007) expresses one female gamer's frustration with such designs:

“I think that most video games are geared towards younger males. They just don't think that there's an audience, like, female. They're geared more towards the man ... Anytime you have a female fighter, she's got like huge breasts and a flat stomach and long legs and it's always [an] exact outfit you'll never see in real life. It's all, like, glorified. (Danni)”

In addition, games designed with women specifically in mind are often somewhat childish, which may unintentionally (perhaps sometimes intentionally?) suggest to female consumers that their interests and abilities are not as mature as those of males.

The process by which I plan to issue this challenge will require five steps:

1. Examine existing literature for gender stereotypes and assumptions behind today's traditionally¹ masculine-skewed gaming
2. Identify key "offensive" characteristics of current games
3. Examine literature on cognitive similarities/differences between men and women
4. Look at the variety of women's gaming interests and personalities
5. Suggest ways game developers can appeal to a broader audience which includes females and does not deter them through generalizations and traditional male-only themes

With the final step, this research will culminate in applicable suggestions for improvement. If taken seriously by developers, I am hopeful that these suggestions could open doors to new prosperity in the gaming market, and an empowered, successful female consumer-base. Social implications of the ideas I hope to explore include a more continuum-based view of gender and gender-specific interests, as well as the astronomical unnecessary amount of value we place on these reigning traditional stereotypes when deciding in which activities we do or do not take part.

Analysis

Stereotypical themes in current literature

Video games, at their core nature, are as blank a slate as books, film, and other sources of media. When one considers this fact, it begs the questions: why has gaming developed such a strong social identity as male behavior, and why does this identity persist? The question of origin certainly has a complex and elusive answer, but the question of persistence may simply lie in both the lack of viable academic research and the oversights of that which has been done.

When examining current literature on video games, female players are often mentioned as an afterthought. Often it seems that once the researchers have determined that the majority of the "gamer population of interest" is male, the remainder of their study largely ignores the female minority. While this may initially seem like a rather benign dismissal, this serves as a subtle foundation for a body of literature from which women are primarily absent. This glossing over of women naturally carries over into industry, leading to dominant traditional masculine themes and perpetuating a largely male audience.

Current literature also lacks much in the way of simple information about what women *want* from video games. With the exception of a few interviews, there are no polls or surveys to suggest the true attitudes of women toward video games. Because there is such a glaring omission of empirical data about females' gaming interests, it is hard to take the current body of literature seriously when it clearly utilizes only *assumptions* about gaming and gender. Without seeing solid evidence from direct female

¹ I use the term "traditionally" here, because men are traditionally stereotyped as aggressive, action-based sexual beings. In reality, it cannot be assumed that all men enjoy the same types of video games any more than it can be assumed all women do. My research focus remains primarily on women, however, because whether or not men are being *accurately* targeted, they are being targeted nonetheless.

sources, I am inclined to believe that women are simply being told what kinds of games they prefer rather than the industry considering and representing the needs and interests of the (female) audience.



An official rendering of Tifa Lockhart's character, as presented on posters for the 10th anniversary of Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core. (Square-Enix, 2007)

Potentially offensive characteristics of current games

Throughout the literature, the resounding quality of some games that has offended both gamer and non-gamer women has been the sexualized nature of female characters. This is not only a potential source of body-image concerns for women (as well as unrealistic expectations of female conduct for heterosexual men), but also of contention regarding whether these characters truly represent powerful women (who “own” their sexuality as a domineering tactic) or merely serve as pleasing eye candy. In some games, this distinction is clear—and often disturbingly so.

The sexualized nature of female characters in media is no secret to society; our obsession with the busty, curvaceous, physically fit female form in entertainment is alive and well as a byproduct of the primitive sexual selection of yesteryear. Some of the more recognizable female characters in video games are just such archetypal sex symbols—Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider*), Tifa Lockhart (*Final Fantasy*), Rayne (*Bloodrayne*), and Jill Valentine (*Resident Evil*), to name a few. A quick Google search of “female video game characters” yields dozens of “sexiest video

game girls” lists, but little useful information—after hours of searching, I was still unable to find a single basic list of female game characters that was not prefaced with “sexiest” or “best (which often meant “sexiest”)”. Frustrating as the case may be, the prevalence of sexually ideal women in entertainment is by no fault of some secret patriarchal parliament; it is simply ingrained in our culture, for better or for worse.

Women’s responses to the sexualized nature of female game characters are naturally bound to vary, but in reviewing current literature and simply speaking with women (gamers and non-gamers), one gets the sense that most are offended by it at some level. In interviews conducted by Royse, et. al, an experienced female gamer named Chris pinpoints the delicate balance between what is acceptably sexy and what is offensively oversexed:

“It’s not like women want to play ugly characters. They just want to be attractive on their own terms.”

When a game allows a woman to create her own character, it affords her the ability to do just that: define “sexy” by her own terms.

Despite the potential for these feminine ideals to offend, not all women view overt sexuality as pandering to male players. Another female gamer in the interviews, Kara, takes the approach of many game developers: she views her character’s sexiness as tied to her power.

“When I create a character in an RPG, I like to make them as sexy as possible. Haha! I love a sexy and strong female character. A character who is sexy and strong and can still kick a guy’s butt 10 ways to Sunday!”

Surely feminism cannot be defined by one set of beliefs, as that would assume the very same that feminists strive to fight: that all women think and are the same. Therefore it is unreasonable to say that these highly sexualized female characters always represent either eye candy or a vastly empowered woman. By consistently representing women in this strongly sexual way, however, game companies could be creating an industry reputation for viewing women only one way.

A study by Bartlett and Harris (2008) on the effects of video game play on body image emphasizes the clear ability of games to affect the self esteem of players, both male and female. 51 males and 32 females from the Midwestern U.S. were asked to complete body image measures, play 15 minutes of a video game featuring lean, muscular, or otherwise physically “ideal” characters, and complete the body image measures once more. Using a one-way analysis of variance (or ANOVA), Bartlett and Harris were able to determine a decrease in the average body esteem rating of all participants of 3.73 points—a statistically significant change. Further accentuating this drop in self-image is the study’s analysis of the participants’ BMIs and overall gaming habits, which (through regression analyses) suggest that neither factor significantly accounts for this drop in esteem; ergo, the 15 minutes of play is the most likely candidate for the change. Combined with the strict traditional media pressures that have been placed on women for decades, effects such as this are just further chips into the global esteem of the female sex. From a purely industrial standpoint, these added body image stressors hardly stand to broaden the gaming audience.

Of course, it isn’t just body type that creates this rift between the reality of women and the “ideal form.” As Danni mentioned in the earlier quote, clothing plays a significant role as well: “...it’s always [an] exact outfit you’ll never see in real life.” Arguably, video games are a world of fantasy and creativity in which artists and designers can create unique outfits that might be too expensive or flamboyant for the real world. However, this creative power tends to manifest itself on female characters in increased exposure of skin and cleavage.

Beasley and Standley bring this particular issue to light in their 2002 study of 47 randomly selected Nintendo 64 and Playstation console games. 597 human (or humanoid) characters were coded by console, game category, rating, gender, species, sleeve length, neckline, lower body clothing, and cleavage. In the results, not only were merely 13.74% of the characters encountered in the first 20 minutes of each game female, but female characters consistently showed more skin than males. If it can be assumed (and I believe it’s safe to do so) that these female characters are neither overweight nor

underdeveloped, one can imagine the effects this could have on the esteem of a female player or the sexual expectations of a heterosexual male.

A less extrinsic offense perpetrated by game companies may be the simple lack of titles that appeal to adolescent and adult girls and women. Games that do not have almost exclusively masculine themes are usually targeted toward female children, and are almost entirely based on traditionally gendered concepts: cooking, makeup, fashion, etc. Because childhood is such a formative time, this may partially explain how traditional social ideas about video games and gender are perpetuated.

At the very least, it is worthwhile to point out that game companies have recognized young women at all. A brief article in *Maclean's* (Chezzi, 2004) raves that some sources have reported females as up to 40% of the gaming audience, but at the same time seems to define this percentage as girls rather than grown women. The article reads:

"But it takes more than slapping a picture of Barbie on the box to make it a winner at slumber parties. 'Girls like simulation games, controlling their characters and they like puzzle-solving,' says Michelle Liem, senior marketing manager for Disney's Buena Vista Games. Carrie Heeter, a digital media arts professor at Michigan State University, adds that girls want light humour and fun characters compared to boys who'd rather fight aliens."

Although there is nothing necessarily false in this passage, one can't help but taste something bitter about it. Here again is the nefarious gender dichotomy that is drilled into our children from the moment they are born into the world. A question that remains unanswered is whether girls and boys really *do* prefer light humor and battling aliens, respectively, or whether they will simply go along with whatever adults suggest they will enjoy. The more important question, of course, is why do we assume that *all* children of a certain gender will enjoy the same types of games? Furthermore, why do we continue to make this assumption as our children (and we ourselves) grow? These questions begin to lead us down a murky path into the vague definition and function of gender which we will not explore in full here, but they are nevertheless interesting to ponder in the context of gaming. What, then, of the grown female gamers of the world? Why do companies continually fail to target this clearly open portion of the market? Part of the answer may lie in the fact that there is also a dichotomy of two particular "kinds" of games.

In most cases, video games can be separated into two basic types: casual and hardcore. A casual game is one playable by individuals of any level of experience, usually with a simple goal such as solving a puzzle, earning points, playing a sport, or performing some other real-world task (e.g. *Pac-man*, *Luxor*, *Wii Fit*). A hardcore game is intended for moderate to advanced players, often with intricate control systems, a high level of player engagement, and the intent of/possibility for many hours of play (e.g. *Call of Duty*, *Halo*, *Left 4 Dead*.) Unsurprisingly, many of these hardcore titles have strong traditional masculine themes—war/conflict, frequent action scenes, scantily-clad women, etc.

In an effort to include female players and remain gender partisan, game companies often take to developing more casual games which tend to lack either traditionally masculine or feminine themes. Initially, this seems promising to the establishment of some plane of so-called "gaming equality."

However, simply maintaining a volume of casual games does not necessarily solve the dearth of titles that might entertain and engage adult females as well as many current hardcore titles might engage males.

From a list of the bestselling games of all time (Marvin, 2007), I loosely coded 8 of 29² titles as games that may be viewed socially as hardcore based on content, genre, and difficulty (*table 1*). Racing, simulation, and educational games were generally coded as casual, whereas role-playing and first- or third-person shooters were coded as hardcore.

Table 1

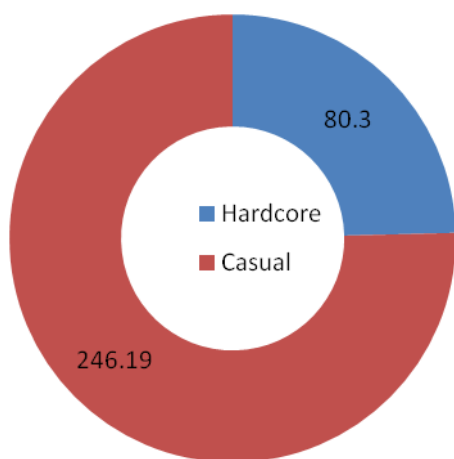
Title	Copies Sold (in millions)	“Hardcore?”
Pokemon Red, Blue and Green	20.08	no
Super Mario Bros. 3	18	no
The Sims	16	no
Nintendogs	14.75	no
Pokemon Gold and Silver	14.1	no
Super Mario Land	14	no
Pokemon Ruby and Sapphire	13	no
The Sims 2	13	no
Super Mario 64	11	no
Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec	11	no
Pokemon FireRed and LeafGreen	10.66	no
New Super Mario Bros.	10.52	no
Gran Turismo	10.5	no
Pokemon Diamond and Pearl	10	no
Super Mario Bros. 2	10	no
Brain Age	8.61	no
Gran Turismo 2	8.5	no
Mario Kart 64	8.47	no
Donkey Kong Country	8	no
Pokemon Yellow	8	no
Super Mario Kart	8	no
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City	13	yes
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	12	yes

² The title of this list references 25 top selling games; however, tied sales amounts have led to a list total of 29.

Grand Theft Auto III	11	yes
Final Fantasy VII	9.8	yes
Starcraft	9.5	yes
World of Warcraft	9	yes
Halo 2	8	yes
GoldenEye 007	8	yes

A simple visualization of the results (*figure 1*) for these titles makes clear the fact that the games coded hardcore make up only about a quarter of sales for the top selling games of all time.

Figure 1



In light of this, it appears that despite the large proportion of males in the video gaming audience, the prevalence of masculine themes in a hardcore game is not necessarily a good predictor of high sales. I believe this is all the more reason for game developers to not only continue making casual games, but to work on building a strong female consumer base through games that neither stereotype nor ignore them—without the worry that less time spent developing their traditional masculine hardcore titles might be injurious to profit by any significant margin.

Cognitive differences between men and women

Concepts for current female-targeted games appear to be based around a consensus that there are key differences between the minds and preferences of women and men. In her article *Women, Video Gaming and Learning*, Elisabeth Hayes explains the difficulty with such assumptions quite eloquently:

“...[T]he number of middle aged women who play puzzle-type games has been interpreted as representing an innate female preference for “problem-solving,” when it could be just as likely that women play such games because they can be played in short periods of time and that they are readily available on internet, both factors important for incorporating game play into schedules full of adult responsibilities. Similarly, girls and women often tell stories of how, as children, computers and game consoles were purchased for their brothers or placed in their brothers’ rooms, giving girls fewer opportunities to play games as well as further reinforcing the idea that gaming is a masculine practice (Margolis & Fisher, 2002).”

There is no question that males and females differ in the way the brain processes information. The point that many seem to be missing is that often the cognition of a task is a state function: the outcome

is the same despite the pathway taken. Put simply, while men and women may differ in *how* tasks are accomplished, current literature lacks evidence that a purely cognitive divergence lies behind differences in how *well* these tasks are accomplished.

In a 2006 study of male and female brain region activity, Bell, et al asked 23 males and 10 females to perform a word generation task, a spatial attention task, and a working memory task while undergoing magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). For each task, it was found that the areas of the brain activated during processing differed between males and females; however, performance results for these tasks did not differ in any statistically significant way. This result suggests that although the *means* by which cognition occurred was different, sex was not a likely explanation for variation in performance.

There is another layer to the cognitive differences between men and women here: even if the performance abilities of men and women may not differ, cognitive and biochemical processes may be in place that simply attract males to video games more than females. A study of 22 healthy students at Stanford (Hoeft, Watson, Kesler, Bettinger, & Reiss, 2008) –11 males, 11 females—examined activity in the mesocorticolimbic system, the dopamine-activated portion of the brain responsible for reward and reinforcement. Subjects underwent an MRI while playing a computer game in which the directive was to “click as many balls as possible.” After adjusting for potential interfering variables (such as “neuropsychological profiles, lower-level motor performance, and computer and video-game experience”), researchers found that males showed greater activation and functional connectivity than females in this portion of the brain. This finding provides a possible biological reason for why males make up such a large portion of the gaming audience, and suggests that perhaps men are quite literally chemically attracted to playing video games more often and in larger amounts than females. From a business standpoint, however, simply knowing that men may be more likely to get “hooked” on video games than women is not enough to legitimize a game development team placing all its eggs in a single gender basket.

In light of the lack of evidence to support the idea that men are cognitively any better than women at gaming, developers have taken an enormous misstep in passively dismissing the performance abilities and sensibilities of potential female players. Instead of simply focusing on how to saturate the market with masculine games to increase sales amongst the apparently easy-to-attract male demographic, companies should be actively seeking out new niches from which they can generate revenue. Since it is clear that women have shown some interest in video gaming without proof of physical or cognitive disadvantage, researching the understanding that females have of gaming and finding ways to gain female players should be an obvious first step toward nearly effortless growth in that sector.

The variety of female gamers’ interests

While an individual’s personality, interests and lifestyle may indeed be affected by their biological sex and socially assigned gender, I defy any one person to suggest that their entire identity can be categorized as uniquely male or uniquely female. Why is it, then, that video game (and other entertainment) designers and marketers so often engender their products? Predictably, media and

society have often portrayed women that play hardcore games as masculine and aggressive. As with anything, this stereotype is not necessarily the case, and media (internet media, especially) has begun to reflect this.

In the recent gaming-based hit web-series *The Guild* (2009), writer, actress, and female gamer Felicia Day has both portrayed and challenged some of the predominant female gamer archetypes.

Occasionally Day's timid and rather feminine character, Cyd, interacts with an aggressive female gamer named Riley, who prefers the first-person shooter (FPS) genre³. The interaction of the two caricatures demonstrates the stark contrast that can

exist between the personalities of female gamers, as well as the generic absurdity of gamer stereotypes.

Despite the fact that Cyd is a rather withdrawn and

insecure young woman, she finds strength through the persona of "Codex," her character in the MMORPG she plays regularly. This is not just one of the intricacies of a character, however, as this is common among female gamers. Video games are often viewed as an opportunity to escape daily life, so it is not difficult to find women who play what many would consider hardcore games in an effort to experience the freedom offered by virtual worlds of such depth.

Of course, Just as there are "Cyds" amongst female gamers, there are naturally "Rileys," who prefer competitive, fast-paced, and aggressive games. Riley's interest in these types of games does not translate into some sort of "masculinization" of the character's appearance, however; in fact, despite her hostile tendencies Riley is portrayed as a normal looking, normally dressed woman. It is this choice of casting and wardrobe that underlines the oft-overlooked gray area in which many female gamers reside.

There are also many females who do not play video games on a regular basis, but are considered "moderate" gamers. This may be one of the most important demographics for game companies to explore, as they sit on the edge between those who play often and those who do not play at all. Because moderate gamers cannot be grouped in with either avid gamers or non-gamers, developing a sense of their gaming interests is more difficult than simply assuming they want something "light," "fun," or "casual." This may be the case for part of the moderate female gamer population, but others may want something advanced, something more akin to the highly detailed games being designed and marketed for males. Some of these moderate female gamers may even prefer a mix of both.



Riley (left) is confronted by Cyd (right) in an episode of The Guild. (Image by director of photography John Schmidt, 2009)

³ A first-person shooter is a game in which the majority of the action takes place in the form of firing a weapon at enemies from the point of view of the character. This is distinguishable from a third-person shooter in that only the limbs and weapons of the character are visible, whereas a third-person viewpoint would reveal the full character to the player. In gamer culture, one of the most prominent genre-based stereotypes is that of the supposed aggressive, egotistical nature of FPS players (or at least those who prefer them almost exclusively).

The opinions of any target group, male or female, are elusive without the aid of interviews, studies, and surveys. For this reason, it is imperative that game companies begin reaching out to female gamers and non-gamers to begin to understand their true attitudes toward gaming and develop new game concepts that appeal to women of all ages, as well as women of all levels of play (light to avid). In the end, it all comes down to the dangers of stereotyping *anyone*. It is dangerous to suggest that all people of a certain type exclusively enjoy a certain set of things. As corporations that claim to serve the entertainment needs of the public, the public should be treated with the utmost respect—and that means leaving generalizations out of the picture.

Suggestions for design, development, and marketing

Focus on quality concept, plot, and execution.



A screenshot of the detailed character generation controls from *Dragon Age*. (Chick, 2009) The header reads "Appearance and Voice," and the player is given options along the side for preset appearances, skin, hair, eyes, nose, mouth, jaw/cheeks, neck/ears, portrait (currently selected), and voice.

Certainly the key idea for anyone developing interactive media is to "hook" and continuously engage a user with a high-quality level of experience and involvement. This is most easily and fully accomplished in the genre of Role Playing Games (RPGs) which often have large, deeply interactive open universes with multiple methods of plot advancement. Two good examples of this come from developer BioWare, with the games *Mass Effect* (2007) and *Dragon Age* (2009). Both games exist in universes of colossal size, each with hundreds of possibilities and pathways. Players are allowed to customize the main character to a high level of detail, tweaking age lines, eye shape, complexion, tone of voice, back-story, etc.

In *Dragon Age*, the writers have also inserted both playable and non-playable character dialogue that indirectly comments on perceived gender inequalities,

usually suggesting the value of female game characters as capable fighters against opposing forces. An example of this comes during a conversation that can be held between the player's main character, the Grey Warden, and one of the more "conventionally-minded" members of the central group, Sten (another playable character).

Sten: "I don't understand. You look like a woman."

Grey Warden: "What's not to understand about that?"

Sten: "You are a Grey Warden. So it follows that you can't be a woman."

Grey Warden: "Why not?"

Sten: "Women are priests, artisans, shopkeepers, or farmers. They don't fight."

Grey Warden: "That's not a universal truth. Some women fight."

Sten: "Why would women ever wish to be men? That makes no sense."

Grey Warden: "They don't wish to be men. They wish to be women who fight."

Sten: "Do they also wish to live on the moon? That's as attainable."

Grey Warden: "I'm a woman, and I'm fighting."

Sten: "One of those things can't be true. A person is born: qunari, or human, or elven, or dwarf. He doesn't choose that. The size of his hands, whether he is clever or foolish, the land he comes from, the color of his hair. These are beyond his control. We do not choose, we simply are."

Grey Warden: "But a person can choose what to do."

Sten: "Can they? We'll see."

Because game dialogue is interactive (players are given several responses to choose from), we see in this brief, seemingly unimportant conversation how players are not only exposed to the existence of gender stereotypes, but also given the opportunity to actually choose responses that challenge them.

World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2005) is another finely tuned game which has drawn in players of all types with its graphic quality, storyline, depth of player engagement and ongoing updates to content. The customization of player experience is extremely high, which does not pigeonhole players into stereotypes. Gender issues and discrimination, when they arise, tend to spawn from multiplayer interactions rather than aspects of the game.

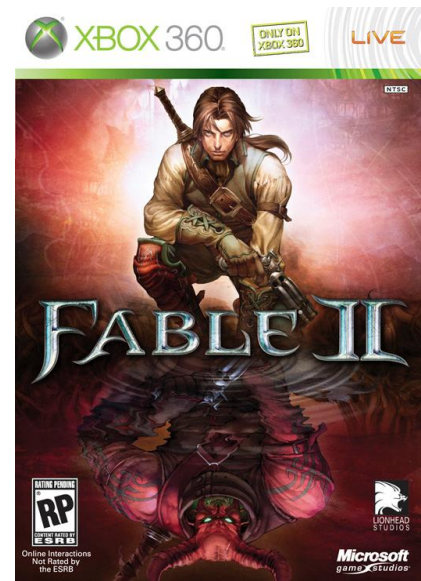
While these examples fall into the flexible genre of the RPG, dedication to concept, plot, and execution can be extended to the storylines, graphics, and/or controls of any genre. If a game is well made, it should draw players without having to profile them.

Use universal human themes.

- 1. The triumph of "good" over "evil."** As one of the most basic concepts of storytelling, good versus evil creates a basic framework onto which further context and plot can be molded. The basic drive to overcome obstacles and thwart opposing forces will lead players through the game by their own sense of righteousness. In the *Resident Evil* series (Capcom, 1996-2009), players direct their main character through encounters with hordes of individuals infected with various strains of viruses developed by "evil" bioterrorism developer, Umbrella Corp. Antagonists involved with Umbrella are usually portrayed very clearly as such, often to a caricature-like degree. In development, writers can also get creative in tweaking the definitions of "good" and "evil," playing with the concept of morality and intriguing players by challenging their understanding of right and wrong.
- 2. Choice.** Two excellent examples of game series that utilize choice both come from the developer Lionhead: *Fable* (2004-2008) and *Black & White* (2001-2005). In both game series, developers have intended for people to make specific and often difficult choices which directly affect one's appearance and game-play experience. If a player chooses to act negatively toward others, non-playable characters begin to fear the player, fleeing and screaming. If a player is kind and positive toward others, he or she becomes beloved by them. To satisfy a player's desire to see

instant results from his or her actions, developers have made game choices immediately affect character appearances. The realism added by these direct effects of player's choices has been a top selling point for Lionhead's games, but it is merely a perk. Visible effects or not, players will simply be intrigued by having any choice at all.

3. **Coming of age.** Growth and change are central to humanity, and therefore add a dimension of realism and depth as a plot device. Video games rarely span a long enough period of time to display the full coming-of-age experience of a character, but the concept of personal transformation can still be used creatively to capture a player emotionally. The game series *The Sims* (Maxis/EA Black Box, 2000-2009) is an obvious example of this, as players are allowed to nurture and guide characters through life from birth⁴ to death. Some games of non-simulation genres utilize this concept by allowing a player to play in both the main character's child and adult stages, peppering major plot points with devices like flash-backs and flash-forwards (e.g. the Fable series).
4. **Mystery/the unknown.** Much as it does in our lives, the unknown can propel a player through a video game by their own desire to uncover the mystery at hand. Many games already employ this tactic in small amounts (sometimes paired with the "puzzles/problem solving" concept below) to draw players across the threshold of the next game sequence—after which more clues may be revealed. A clever twist on this concept is the intentional omission of character back-story, creating a mystery surrounding the very concept and plot of the game itself. Just such an example is expertly employed in the "action-adventure" game *Shadow of the Colossus* (Ico, 2005). In the introductory scene, the main character enters a temple and places an unknown young woman on the altar, but it is not until the end of the game that the player learns of her identity and the reason she has been brought to the temple. The lack of information which leads to mystery and/or confusion is a universal experience among people, and a player will likely follow it from beginning to end, if it is done well.
5. **Desire/ambition.** This theme should be obvious, and is already used in some form in most games already. Nevertheless, it remains an important theme to mention, as it is central to our existence and can therefore be used to draw in first-time gamers with the promise of a sense of achievement. In its most basic form, desire is employed simply through the directive of the game—in Tetris, for example, the desire/directive is to gain points through clearing full rows of



The Fable Series' prolific use of choice and its effects is evident in the cover art for its second game (Chen, 2009). Players who perform immoral deeds develop horns and twisted features, while players who perform moral deeds become increasingly attractive.

⁴ This is dependent on the generation of the character. A player will not be able to see a character's birth unless it has been created by two pre-existing game characters. Therefore, the player will not necessarily be able to guide the *initial* game characters through life from "birth to death."

blocks as the oddly-shaped pieces are stacked. But merely earning points may not be enough to make regular gamers out of non-gamers or even moderate gamers, and developers should look to be creative in designing a clear objective that fulfills some human need for achievement. In many RPGs, desire is created by naming the main character the sole savior of a given region and declaring that certain items, people, and/or information must be found. This lays clear ground rules and ambitions for the player, rewarding him/her with a sense of accomplishment with each acquisition.

- 6. Puzzles/problem solving.** Not to be forgotten (especially with the enormous amount of sales in the casual sector), problem solving is a core tenet to existing as a higher being. Providing players with questions of logic challenges them to answer and achieve a sense of accomplishment. RPGs often implement puzzles in the form of dungeon⁵ obstacles, requiring that a player solve them before being allowed to advance toward the final confrontation. Casual puzzle games such as *Tetris* (Pajitnov & Gerasimov, 1984) and *CrosswordS* (Nuevo Retro Games, 2008)—a crossword puzzle game for the Nintendo DS—represent more obvious examples, but cannot be ignored. These stand-alone types of puzzles provide players an opportunity to relax and exercise their logic skills.

Reach out to non-gamer females by treating them as potentially capable players rather than by “dumbing down” game concepts to accommodate an insecure/inexperienced audience.

The “dumbing down” of game concepts can be defined loosely by the assumption that female gamers prefer the simplicity of childish casual games over the depth currently reserved for hardcore masculine games. Such generalizations can suggest to women that not only do they prefer simple games, but will really only be any *good* at simple games.

Eliminating this stereotype from marketing could effectively help to dispel current societal beliefs that women are not “meant” to play video games. This suggestion is likely the most difficult to implement, considering the subtle and socially ingrained nature of many of the statements that can make women feel incapable compared to men when it comes to playing video games. Although designers and marketers cannot stop the public from saying and acting as they will with regard to gender stereotypes in games, they can at the very least attempt to remove this behavior from their own activities.

Conclusions

If game designers, developers, and marketers are up to the task of examining and adjusting the way they currently produce video games, the lost female demographic should not be a difficult one to champion. Even if some companies find themselves unwilling to believe that women *are* a valuable set of equally capable gamers, there can be no harm in exploring this relatively untapped niche. If absolutely nothing else, simply creating a *sense* among female gamers that they are viewed as capable could have positive

⁵ “Dungeon” is just one of many terms used in reference to any phase of the game (usually an RPG) which will lead a player through a set of obstacles to a confrontation (usually minor in comparison to whatever the “final battle” may be). Many games utilize several of these dungeon phases to advance the plot in convenient chunks.

effects on sales figures, despite the fact that it should be unconscionable to do so only for monetary gain.

It would be unfair (and frankly hypocritical) to suggest that the entire team of minds behind a given video game is comprised of chauvinist males with no flexibility to their staunch traditional ideas. This is not the image I have intended to portray, and hopefully it is not the image that develops as a reader traverses these pages. As a development team works together toward a goal, a project can take on its own life and connotations based on the combined work of hundreds of individuals. It is with this in mind that we must be understanding of game companies rather than assume that the stereotypes and potentially offensive themes that develop are born of some kind of direct malicious intent.

I should also mention that it has become clear that gender identity is not as black and white as once thought, and this idea has not escaped me as I've researched and written on this topic. When I speak of and define "men" and "women," I am aware of the strange irony that develops in using the terms within the bounds of their current social connotations. To that end, I can only provide a disclaimer of sorts in which I admit the difficulty of attempting to tear down gender stereotypes in gaming while utilizing social definitions of masculine and feminine.

If anything should be taken away from this paper, it is that the topic obviously requires further research; not simply through an examination of what we believe to be true about women's interests in gaming, but through an active and ongoing dialogue with female gamers and non-gamers. If game developers and marketers can find a way to open this discussion, it is likely they will receive a deluge of opinions that contrast with the types of games they have created in the past; but as with any change from "business as usual," it will take time, diligence, and losses to truly reach a point of balance with respect to the female gaming audience.

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