

WOMEN, VIDEO GAMING, & LEARNING: BEYOND STEREOTYPES

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Article to appear in *TechTrends*, forthcoming

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Abstract

This paper critically assesses current beliefs about women and video gaming, and provides an alternative perspective on gender issues in game play. Implications are drawn for the design of games for learning.

Gender and Gaming

While video gaming has grown immensely as an industry over the last decade, with growing numbers of gamers around the globe, including women, gaming continues to be a very gendered practice. The apparent gender divide in video gaming has caught the attention of both the gaming industry as well as educators, generating considerable and conflicting perspectives on its causes and consequences, as well as strategies to address it. The gaming industry obviously has a vested interest (profit) in attracting more gamers, and women have seemed a likely market for quite some time. Women already are gaming in growing numbers but they tend not to play the more complex, revenue-generating “hard-core” games such as first-person shooters and fantasy games in as many numbers as men. Women tend to play more “casual” games such as *Tetris* and *Solitaire*, or games like *The Sims* (Angelo, 2004, May 14; Krotoski, 2004).

For educators, there are reasons other than profit for giving attention to gender issues in gaming. Video gaming is now often children’s first and most compelling introduction to digital technologies, and is presumed to be a door to a broader range of digital tools and applications. Gaming might help develop confidence and skills in using

digital technologies, leading to an increased interest and aptitude for careers in computer science and other fields that rely heavily on such technologies(AAUW Educational Commission on Teaching, 2000). Playing casual games might not offer as many opportunities for developing more advanced skills such as modding. Women and men's preferences and aptitudes for different kinds of games might also have implications for the design and use of instructional technologies that appeal to both sexes (see Squire & Jenkins, 2004, for examples of computer and video games used for education).

These possibilities have led to a flurry of research and speculation on girls' and women's attitudes towards games, self-identified preferences, and gaming strategies. The result has been the development of "girl games," a host of rather broad assertions about differences between women and men as gamers, and a considerable amount of ongoing disagreement about the value of both (see, for example, Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Wright, n.d.). My goal in this paper is to point out some problems with popular assumptions about women as gamers, and to suggest an alternative way of understanding their orientations towards gaming. I will suggest some implications of this perspective for educators who are interested in designing games for learning.

The Problem with Mars and Venus

Theories about gender differences in digital gaming tend to be based on inferences drawn from the types of games that women and men already play, or what they say they would prefer. This type of evidence is problematic in a number of ways. First, interpretations of women and men's current gaming practices and preferences often give little attention to how these are dependent on the relative accessibility of different

games, past experience (or lack of experience) with gaming, and knowledge of different game genres. For example, the number of middle aged women who play puzzle-type games has been interpreted as 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 games into 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).

A second problem is that explanations for gendered play patterns tend to be linked to broad theories about biologically or psychologically based gender differences. These theories often have rather tenuous connections to the specific practices of game play, and do not take into account the effects of personal history or social context. For example, the belief that women prefer indirect competition to direct competition has been widely touted as a explanation for why women seem to dislike violent games (Graner Ray, 2004). This preference is assumed to have evolved from women’s historical role in childbearing and caring for young offspring, making the threat of physical injury more significant for them than for men (Campbell, 2002; Graner Ray, 2004). Among other weaknesses, this notion seems to ignore evidence that, from very early ages, men are given much more encouragement and opportunity to derive pleasure from aggressive, competitive play, while women are encouraged to engage in more sedate, nurturing types of activities (Valian, 1998).

A third problem with current beliefs about gender and gaming is that diversity among women as well as among men is typically ignored in favor of making global distinctions between the sexes. Men do not all like the same kinds of games, as is readily apparent in how some men favor sports games, others play only first person shooters, some prefer real time strategy games, while still others gravitate towards role-playing games; furthermore, many men play across genres. Already we know that some women enjoy and are successful at playing “hard-core” games, as can be seen from their comments on various sites devoted to women gamers (e.g., GameGal.com; gamegirladvance.com; GameGirlz.com; WomenGamers.com). Related to this point, assertions about gender attributes are often drawn from particular groups of women, such as adolescent girls or middle aged women, and generalized to women of all ages. In fact, beliefs about the preferences of male gamers still are based on the adolescent hard-core gamer, a profile that does not represent, for example, the gaming practices of many adult men who do not have a luxury of endless hours of gaming, want more depth of game play or who are just as turned off by bimbo female avatars as many women.

Given this complexity, some authors (e.g., Reynolds, 2005) have argued that continued attention to gender as a factor influencing gaming simply reifies difference, contributing to a continued marginalization and misunderstanding of women gamers. While delineating dichotomous differences between the sexes is not helpful, ignoring gender is also problematic. Gender, like it or not, has huge impact on our identities and participation in social practices, including gaming. Obviously, games still tend to be marketed more to men, game magazines cater to males (often celebrating hard core gamer practices and ethos), and the content of many games appears to be designed to

appeal to adolescent male fantasies. In fact, the continued stereotyping of female gamers may reinforce the appeal of gaming for men as a means of asserting and displaying masculinity, similar to certain sports (see, for example, the discussion of gender dynamics and snowboarding in Anderson, 1999).

In the remainder of this article, I wish to offer an alternative to the “pink and blue” conceptualization of men and women as gamers. I argue that:

- (a) Some “female” gaming practices can be attributed to women’s lack of experience with gaming rather than to innate gender-specific preferences. Past experience is one factor that has not been taken into consideration in much past research on women and men’s preferences in gaming. However, this may figure strongly in, for example, women’s reported motivations and preferred learning styles.
- (b) Women’s reactions to overtly gendered practices within games, such as fighting, will vary according to other aspects of their past experience, identities, and motivations.
- (c) Women’s gaming preferences may change over time and experience; in other words, some gaming practices are “acquired” tastes that are enhanced with practice, success, and a supportive social context.

I will use examples from interviews with and observations of two adult women, Joanna and Deirdre, who played *The Elder Scrolls: Morrowind* as part of a university course on video gaming and learning. Both women were in their late 20s and their prior experience with gaming was limited mostly to some console gaming as children. They took the course for similar reasons, primarily because they felt that understanding video gaming would be helpful in their current and future work as educators with adolescents and

young adults. Joanna, who was pursuing an advanced degree in Rhetoric and Composition Studies, was a writing instructor and consultant. She described herself as a somewhat poorly motivated student in the past, and was excited by the potential of understanding new, cutting edge technologies. Deirdre was earning a graduate degree in Curriculum and Instruction, to support her work in Christian youth education. She had excelled in science as a high school student, but switched career plans from premed to education as an undergraduate, despite what she felt were expectations of her as a “girl good in science.”

Joanna and Deidre chose to play *Morrowind* to fulfill the course requirement of playing a video game for 50 hours. *Morrowind* is the third in the series of *The Elder Scrolls* role-playing games. Role-playing games allow players to develop one or more characters by selecting attributes at the beginning and throughout the game, through making choices about strategies and skills. Players’ actions define their characters, and game play changes and evolves in response to these actions. The storyline is more or less structured by a set of challenges or quests that allow players to improve their skills, explore the world of the game, and achieve goals more or less related to the storyline. *The Elder Scrolls* series, particularly *Morrowind*, is distinctive in its open-endedness, offering players a vast number of choices about how to develop their character, what types of goals and activities to pursue. Because of its open-endedness and accommodation of a wide variety of potential gaming styles, *Morrowind* offered a particularly useful context for exploring how gender might have influenced the women’s orientations and practices within game (for more information about the game, see <http://www.morrowind.com>).

Playing Like a Newbie? Confounding Gender and Experience

Some widely circulated assertions about gender differences in gaming include: (1) men are motivated simply by winning, women want to accomplish something socially significant and beneficial; (2) men want to start over and accept punishment for errors; women want errors forgiven and to continue on in the game; and (3) men prefer to learn through expository explanation, while women want to observe model game play (Graner Ray, 2004). Upon closer examination, these so-called female preferences could readily be attributed to women's lower likelihood for status among peers or identity reinforcement simply from "beating" the game (desire to achieve other goals), greater uncertainty about their odds of success in the game (desire for forgiveness of errors), and lack of concrete images of game play (desire for modeling). Even these preferences can be mediated by women's past learning experiences and their self-perceptions as learners.

Joanna and Deirdre as "newbies" demonstrated quite different orientations to learning how to play the game, providing good examples of the diverse ways that new women gamers might orient to game play. While *Morrowind* is quite open-ended, it does have a series of quests that move the player through the central storyline, that of finding her "real" identity as the next leader and legendary figure of *Morrowind*. Joanna was quite motivated by "winning" or mastering the game through completing the main quests and "making it to the end of the game." For her, the opportunity to succeed in the game reflected a chance to change a past pattern of what she characterized as rather limited effort and mixed success with difficult tasks, particularly with stereotypically masculine school subjects such as chemistry. In contrast, Deirdre's approach to game play was

motivated by a desire to do what she wanted, reflecting her present desire to find her own life path rather than conforming to what she felt was expected of her. The women were more motivated by the significance of their own personal goals rather than by any particular goals offered by the game itself.

Morrowind is a relatively forgiving game; the player can save at any point and death results only in starting again at the last save. After many hours of game play, Joanna chose to start over the game when she decided she didn't like her avatar's constellation of skills and that she wasn't "doing it right." She viewed this not as punishment but as a chance to start with a clean slate and perfect her game play. Deidre opted out of playing the game the "right way" and did what she found most pleasurable; errors, such as dying or taking the wrong path, were simply part of figuring out the game, a source of learning rather than something to be punished or forgiven. Joanna relied on a wide variety of resources for learning; while modeling was not readily available, she readily used other people's advice as well as expository documents, such as walkthroughs. Deidre preferred to figure things out on her own, referring only to guides for making potions, which became one of her favorite activities within the game.

As these examples suggest, predicting the preferences of new female gamers is likely to be difficult. How a new gamer will approach learning to play a game will be reflective of her goals and self-confidence. Of course, *Morrowind* accommodated a variety of learning modes, and not all games are as flexible. In addition, both women struggled with learning to navigate the game space, and their personal goals combined with the pressure of a course requirement contributed to their persistence.

Playing Like a Girl? The Meanings of Gendered Practices

Women have different interpretations of and responses to overtly gendered practices within video games, just as they do in the “real world.” Take as one example the assertion that women prefer games that allow them to develop cooperative social relationships, rather than games that feature violence as the main form of social ‘interaction’ (Angelo, 2004, May 14; Goodale, 2004; Graner Ray, 2004; Laurel, 1998). This assertion often is based on women’s apparent affinity for multiplayer games, or single player games like *The Sims* that involve managing families and interpersonal relationships. A common explanation for this preference is that mutuality and relationships are a primary source of identity for women, while men’s identities are defined more by individuality and social hierarchy (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991).

Morrowind offers somewhat limited opportunities for cooperative social relationships, although it does involve a considerable amount of interaction with NPCs. Players do have the choice of joining various factions that offer additional quests and add to the game narrative. Joanna and Deirdre both seemed drawn to more positive social interactions to the extent that they were possible in the game. However, these interactions had quite different meanings and purposes for each woman. For Joanna, “talking to other people” became a key strategy for obtaining information and resources. Her goal was to “get them to do what she wanted” through persuasion and wearing impressive clothes. She also joined as many factions as possible, until she reached the point that their demands were interfering with her progress on the main quests, and she abandoned them.

Joanna's skill at social relationships became instrumental to her progress and power in the game.

In contrast, at the outset of the game, Deirdre chose to be a healer, reflecting her real-life desire to "help other people." The game did not provide many opportunities for her to use these healing powers, which disappointed her (and reflects a bias in the game). She did enjoy occasional opportunities to assist characters in the game, such as freeing slaves. However, she avoided most factions and took quests only when as long as they met her own moral standards. She upped her skills in potion-making specifically so that she could be independent as well as to make money; in fact, she bragged about buying out the village salespeople.

Each woman did find pleasure in relating to characters in the game in ways that did not involve violence. However, these interactions were not necessarily helping relationships but were sources of power and self-assertion. Indeed, for both women the game provided opportunities to experiment with new forms of identity that they desired beyond the game.

Playing Like a Boy? Enjoying "Masculine" Pleasures

Combat is typically used as an example of a masculine practice commonly found in video games that women do not find appealing. One explanation for women's dislike of combat is that it represents a form of direct competition, while women are more likely to be comfortable with (and have experience in) indirect competition (i.e., through negotiation or compromise) (Graner Ray, 2004). However, there is ample evidence of women who are avid players of the most stereotypically male-oriented games, who enjoy

fighting, competition, and independence as much as many male players (see, for example, the interviews with female gamers in chapter 14 of Cassell & Jenkins, 1998, and in Taylor, 2003). Such women continue to be treated as aberrations, leaving us with little insight into how and why they find such so-called masculine practices so pleasurable.

Joanna and Deirdre (and indeed, all of the women in their graduate course) were not initially enthusiastic about the fighting in *Morrowind*. While they both expressed an initial desire to avoid fighting, each woman construed combat differently, in relation to their own past experience and goals. When it became apparent that fighting was unavoidable, at least for self-defense, they both improvised identities and practices that allowed them to engage in combat in ways that they found comfortable and rewarding.

For Joanna, her lack of prior experience with (virtual) combat, in combination with her concerns about “doing things right” in the game, led her to figure fighting as a potential opportunity for failure. She initially tried to avoid fighting by choosing a character that could make potions and using magic. After discovering that she didn’t enjoy potion-making (she compared it to cooking, which she also disliked), Joanna found cheat codes that enabled her to fight with some assurance of success. She enjoyed fighting, particularly to obtain new items as “drops” from her slain opponents.

At the start of the game, Deirdre figured combat as something that conflicted with her desire to be a healer. When she discovered that she had to defend herself against hostile creatures as she explored the territory of the game, she became adept at hand-to-hand combat – fighting without weapons – something that ultimately became a considerable source of pride for her since it represented a somewhat unusual skill.

The context of the game had an important influence on the women's pleasure in combat. Fighting, when figured within the game world as a valued practice that required skill and that was crucial to accomplishing goals, became a source of power and mastery. Taylor (2003) suggests that women's enjoyment of violence in video gaming results not from the fighting per se, but from public display of proficiency in a valued practice: "the actual fight is as much an opportunity to demonstrate the valued qualities of game mastery as anything" (p. 34). In Taylor's work as well as for the two women in this study, the pleasures of fighting were connected to other goals and identities. The women in Taylor's study were playing *Everquest*, and fighting skills were essential for participating in raids and otherwise gaining status among other players. In the single player context of *Morrowwind*, these social relationships did not exist. For Joanna and Deirdre, skill in combat was not, at this stage in their gaming, a primary source of identity as much as a means of supporting practices more integral to these identities: a means of gathering great clothes, potion ingredients, exploring new lands, or "doing things right." Not only the game context, but also the context of the university course made fighting an acceptable and even valued practice, as the women shared experiences with other women in class and could brag about their growing proficiency with fighting in these games.

Gender and Games for Learning

What can we draw from these examples for the design and use of games for more overtly educational purposes? Below I list some general recommendations:

1. *Avoid stereotypes.* This sums up the major point of this paper, in case you missed it. Don't base a game on the assumption that women and girls want to shop, talk,

dress up, or play nice. Yes, they may enjoy these activities, but they may also enjoy beating up monsters, driving fast cars, saving the world, getting a lot of gold, and winning the game. They might need some support at first, particularly if they have never wielded a weapon or held a controller, but don't let women miss out on activities that might ultimately be quite motivating, just because they are supposed to be "masculine" pleasures.

2. *Don't assume women are all alike.* Joanna and Deirdre's game play was quite different, even in the context of the same game. We know that no one teaching style appeals to all people, and neither does any particular game. The same thing applies to men as well; keep in mind that while *The Sims* is touted for its appeal to women, about half of *Sims* players are actually male. A variety of experiences are needed to motivate different women and to sustain their interest and success in learning. Some women like explicit guidance, some like to figure things out on their own; some like open-ended exploration, some like a more linear sequence of tasks. Women like variety too, just like men. In addition, women can have quite different responses to overtly gendered practices, responses that do not readily conform to common assumptions and that may change with time and experience.
3. *Provide scaffolding for new gamers.* Many commercial games require skills and genre knowledge that males with prior gaming experience take for granted. This includes not only in-game practices such as combat, but also knowledge of game interfaces, spatial navigation, and strategies such as exploring all spaces to find useful items or to discover new territory. These elements may be incorporated into educational games, but be sure to make those things learnable in the game.

Good tutorials are essential for new gamers, but avoid making them too didactic.

The best tutorials are like a “sandbox’ (Gee, 2003); they immerse players in scaffolded game play, so they feel like playing the real game.

4. *Do consider overall game design, not just particular elements in isolation.* The interrelationship of various kinds of practices may be more important to a successful gaming experience than any single attribute of a game. Simply taking out violence, or adding puzzles and social interactions, is not the way to make games that have broad appeal for women. In fact, games that combine elements associated with both stereotypically masculine and feminine pleasures and strengths may ultimately be the most stimulating and potentially valuable games for learning as well as entertainment. *Morrowind* proved to be a pretty good example of a game with such a mixture of elements, though even this had its biases, such as the imperative of fighting, or the limited opportunities for healing other characters. Incorporating familiar as well as unfamiliar practices, that both draw on and extend players’ prior knowledge and skills, is a principle of good instructional design in any context.
5. *Do create a supportive social context for gaming-to-learn.* A recent study found that college students of both genders typically played video games with friends and family, not in isolation (Jones, 2003). Players of commercial games are supported by extensive networks of other gamers, who share walkthroughs, cheats, maps, and other player-generated resources. Such networks also offer social recognition for gaming expertise and encouragement for newbies. This kind

of support may be particularly important for women, who need to challenge stereotypes about their skills and abilities as gamers.

Ultimately, it seems quite likely that designing games that will appeal to women – and are good for learning - is a lot like designing good games in general. Attention to diversity of experience, ability, knowledge, and goals will lead to more successful and motivating designs for any kind of learning, game-based or otherwise.

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