

Gender in 64 bit:

Examining gender and video games

Lisa Pickoff-White

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Video Games: Games to teach life skills

By Lisa Pickoff-White

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 14 (UPI) -- Part 1 of 2. A group of researchers is trying to take video games from being just an after-school activity and introduce them into the classroom.

The Education Arcade, an organization of game designers, researchers and policymakers, is working on a series of educational games and examining how to use them in schools, teaching everything from physics to history.

One such game is called Revolution, a modification of Neverwinter Nights, a popular role-playing game. In Revolution, members of a high school class become citizens of a town during the American Revolution, where the students must navigate through life, both politically and socially.

Henry Jenkins, director of comparative media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, thinks games can fill in the gaps of traditional teaching.

"Students have a hard time learning and teachers have a hard time teaching the process of history and large-scale aspects of it," Jenkins told United Press International. "Games stimulate a complex process with many variables. They excel at teaching something that traditionally has been hard to show."

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Constance Steinkuehler studies what students learn from the games they already play. She interviews children -- who she calls her informants -- to find out about how they play and what they learn.

For example, in one game, a group of children must decide what to take on a bus with limited space. Each item has a different worth. To decide what to take, the children constructed mathematical models and an Microsoft Excel worksheet of data, Steinkuehler said, adding that the group put more energy into the game than they usually do for a regular class assignment.

"What they were really doing was model-based reasoning," Steinkuehler said. "This is what high-level scientists do and what teachers dream about kids doing in class. I told them, 'what you're doing is science,' and they said, 'we're just finding an exploit in the game.'"

Cooperation is also a large part of game playing. Girls performed better on tests of the material after playing Revolution than their male counterparts, Jenkins and his co-researchers found.

"This was counterintuitive because we thought the learning scale would have to be larger for girls," Jenkins said. "Our hypothesis is that the boys played competitively, whereas the girls played collaboratively. The girls would work together, share secrets and basically did peer-to-peer teaching."

By integrating games into the traditional classroom, teachers are able to persuade students to do things they normally would dislike, but things they need to do to improve their game play or extend the world they are creating, Jenkins said. For Revolution, students research primary materials to find out what really happened during that time period.

Steinkuehler also found that students who normally say they hate writing would write volumes of fan fiction -- stories about favorite games and characters -- that they posted online. The stories helped students improve their writing skills because they would practice writing and peer-edit one another in fan communities.

Jacqueline Coffey, 21, loves to play games. She thinks the activity has improved her writing, hand-eye coordination and ability to work with others, and she said other girls should have the same chances.

"Games are a massive criticism of school," Steinkuehler said. "What they're doing outside of school is so complex and what they're doing inside is so impoverished."

In games, children can create their own worlds and rules and experiment with them, something they would never be able to do in school, Steinkuehler said. Also, because they enjoy the safety of a reset button, children are more likely to take chances.

"Games teach that if I'm not accepted or successful here, I can succeed elsewhere," she said. "I can't succeed as a corporate lawyer, but I can be a successful academic."

Games also make people define and articulate their goals, Jenkins said.

"There are many different ways people can view a scene," he said. "These are evocative spaces where it forces people into these conversations."

Also, games teach girls and boys skills they will need in the working world, Jenkins said.

"There is something good about competition, though," he said. "Women are going to confront men in their own spaces and games are a relatively low risk area to learn how to do that. There's also a benefit for young men to learn how to collaborate with women."

Coffey agreed with Jenkins and Steinkuehler that games help girls and boys interact.

"I think that if men and women have a similar interest, they're more likely to understand each other," she said. "Girls need to see that they can do whatever they want and shouldn't have to live by the stereotypes that are put in place by society. Blow cars up! Chop up aliens! Don't leave all the exciting stuff for the guys!"



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Two-part article on video games and society

Video games: Sexist tendencies

By Lisa Pickoff-White
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WASHINGTON, Feb. 14 (UPI) -- Part 2 of 2. Lara Croft bounces across the screen and as the camera focuses on her every jiggle, the player cannot help but notice her enormous breasts, overshadowed only by the size of her gun.

Characters such as the heroine of the video game "Tomb Raider" have provoked outrage among the academic community and citizen groups. Five years ago, Brenda Laurel and other game developers tried to make "girl-friendly" games, but Mattel bought Laurel's company, buried her product and the girl-game debate went underground.

Now, researchers are trying to integrate video games into education and concern over Lara Croft and her companions is emerging again.

Researchers worry the sexism in games could stop girls from becoming interested in those fields, said Henry Jenkins, director of comparative media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"Computer games are the first introduction to the computer," Jenkins told United Press International. "The gender gap in computer science could partially be attributed to girls

not playing games. If we are going to use games in the classroom, then we better make sure that girls aren't going to be left out."

A lack of women game designers only exacerbates the connection of games with sexism, said Constance Steinkuehler, who teaches cognitive science in education at University Wisconsin-Madison.

"Adolescent guys grow up to create games they wanted to play when they were kids," Steinkuehler told UPI. "I know and work with these guys. They aren't sexist creeps, so we're trying to figure out where the problem is."

Designers often simply regard the process as creating a game -- and not something influential -- so they tend to indulge their fantasies, because no one is there to stop them, she said.

"These guys were working on a character and her breasts just got larger and larger as they added more polygons," Steinkuehler said, referring to a basic step in the computer animation process. "It wasn't until later that someone asked what they were thinking."

The few women designers in the field are not always representative of the general female gaming audience, either, Jenkins said.

A game series called "The Sims" is one of the most popular because it serves a large female market as well as male. Players can create and manipulate characters that live in a town, running the characters' lives from birth until death. Maxis, in Redwood City, Calif., developed the series and achieved this popularity because they employed women to design games that they themselves would play, Jenkins said.

"It's more a matter that Maxis does what a good company would and diversifies itself," he said. "'The Sims' is what happens when you have women working alongside men."

One game player, Kathryn Phillips of Phoenix, blames advertising for portraying women gamers as weak and female game characters as sex objects. Many games provide stronger female role models than almost anyone else, she said, because they are as physically strong as male characters and often are in a traditionally "male" field, such as explorers, scientists or fighters. In advertisements, however, even strong characters appear only to be valued for their over-proportioned bodies.

"I think Lara's (Croft) pretty badass," Phillips told UPI. "She's tough, and she's also smart. She's an archaeologist and she can take care of herself. Try to find a female role model like that in a movie or TV show. But when the Tomb Raider games are advertised, the ads always feature Lara with her breasts hanging out and cheesy tag lines like, 'She's got a body to die for' or something."

Phillips said she thinks one reason Sims' games are so popular is because the advertising campaign is gender-neutral. The ads do not show Sims in small outfits or refer to it as a

dollhouse. Instead, they market it as a world anyone can create, something that appeals to all players, she said.

The types of women characters offered and what they can do matters to female gamers.

Jacqueline Coffey, from Reading, Mass., knows only two other girl gamers from her regular life and five online. One thing she enjoys is playing characters that act the way she would like to act, she said, and added if there were better characters, there would be more female players.

"There's practically no difference between a man and a woman in 'The Sims'," Coffey said. "I found that really refreshing. My girl acted like I do and not like some weird male fantasy, but games like 'Halo 2' seem to do nothing but push back any progress that's been made. The entire alien force, which was made of various races, are all masculine. No women did any voices and the only playable characters were male. The few women that we see either serve Master Chief directly or are simply part of the mass of soldiers."

More female designers probably would mean more female characters, Steinkuehler said, because women naturally would introduce more female characters -- or at least notice there were none in a game.

The lack of female characters or over-sexualized ones can isolate women gamers because they recognize the difference between reality and the game, and how male gamers might perceive them, Steinkuehler said.

Coffey said characterizations of women as sex symbols negatively affect her.

"It makes me feel isolated -- like video games are made specifically to keep girls from playing," she said.

Phillips used to work at EB Games in Flagstaff, Ariz., a national gaming store. She said she remembers people asking to speak to her manager because they did not want to talk to a girl about gaming.

"I had a female manager for a while, and I did take a certain amount of pleasure in sending male customers to her," Phillips said. "I'd also get asked a lot by parents what games they should buy 'for girls,' and I'd say, 'Well, I'm a girl and I've been playing Silent Hill lately.'"

Even as a professional game researcher, Steinkuehler said she can tell horror stories about how she has been treated. At E3, the largest gaming convention in America, she realized designers do not even consider women when creating games.

"I was at E3 at a table with other people and one of the designers of my favorite game comes over," she said. "We were talking and I explained how I researched his game and how I love it and am trying to find out how many other women play it. Finally, he goes:

'You could be our poster girl. You're the only girl we know who plays Lineage,'" a massive multi-player, fantasy role-playing game online.

"All I could think of was, 'I'm doing a Ph.D. and you want me to be your poster girl?'" Steinkuehler said.

Steinkuehler said she finds herself apologizing more than any guy ever would, because girls are not welcome in the video game world.

"In the game world it really slaps me in the face -- sometimes even I feel like I should just apologize when I make a mistake, because, you know, I'm just a girl -- and that's what worries me," she said.

Because games teach children so much, however, Steinkuehler said if she had a daughter she still would want her to play video games.

"Putting a young girl in front of sexist material is bad, but if you engage her about it, she's going to get more out of it," she said.

Jenkins agreed parents have an important role to play.

"Most parents don't have a real understanding of what is going on," he said. "My own sister bought her 9-year-old 'Grand Theft Auto' even after I've spoken to her many times about what is in these games."

Many parents do not realize the violent or sexist content in video games because they think of them as "just games" that are "for kids," Jenkins said.

Many parents do not check the rating of a video game or even know that such a rating system exists.

"I can't think of any other \$60 purchase that people make without knowing what it consists of," Jenkins said. "Parental education is an essential part of this debate."

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Q&A

Making games our own: cosplay

By: Lisa Pickoff-White

Cosplaying, from costume play, is a time-honored tradition from science-fiction and comic book conventions where people dress up as their favorite characters in elaborate costumes and perform skits. But, with the recent explosion of anime, Japanese animation, and video game conventions it's grown to a whole new level. Tiffany Nason is a member of a cosplaying group that has swept East Coast anime convention cosplay competitions for the last few years, performing skits using characters from their favorite series and games. The group, formerly known as Dark Muffin Productions, has a core of 15 members and sometimes as large as 25, depending on how elaborate their skit is that year. Nason lives with three other members of the group in a boisterous house where video games or anime are always on in the background. They spend a lot of time and money trying to figure out how to bring their favorite anime and video game characters to life using wigs, material and a lot of duct tape.

Name: Tiffany Nason

Age: 19

Occupation: waitress/hostess

Location: Tidewater, VA

What was your initial reaction to cosplaying?

The first cosplayer I ever saw was dressed up as Sailor Mercury and she purposefully had the skirt really short, so everywhere she walked you could see her panties. I was 15 at the time, and couldn't imagine going out like that. Then I saw more normal costumes and was like, wow you get to dress up like on Halloween.

What about cosplaying appeals to you?

I like the idea of being able to create something like a costume, as if you were creating for a play, but with anime you have some challenges because your body is not built the way they draw. You are trying to transfer something from 2-D to 3-D. It's very challenging. I find a lot of intriguing designs and it's a lot of fun you get a lot of attention and people take pictures of you. It's very friendly and everyone wants to talk to you. They're like, "Wow, I love that series." It's a very social thing.

What was your first professional cosplay?

It was at Neko-con 5, I was Sailor Katsi from *Sailor Moon*. It was horrible - I was so nervous because I had to wear a pink spandex leotard with a pink tutu in front of 600 people and I was shaking. *Sailor Moon* was really what got me involved, I never knew what anime was until I watched that and I looked online and discovered it was more than just one thing. My favorite costume was Bass, from *Jet Set Radio*, because I got roller blade around a convention.

How much time do you spend on it?

I usually just pick a weekend and spend the entire day doing it. Back in high school I had all this time to do it. My parents are the biggest reason that I could do cosplay, because they saw it as a positive thing since I wanted to go into technical theater. My parents encourage it wholeheartedly.

How much money do you spend on it?

I really try my best to make things affordable. The most expensive costume I've made was \$100. But, I've spent almost \$80 on a single wig. I've made 15 costumes for myself and others in the last three years.

What are the best and worst things about cosplaying?

Cosplay in the end is definitely one of those experiences that I'm glad to have. I have some sort of purpose and goal. Our goal is to go to conventions and better ourselves. Sometimes it can be overwhelming though because you spend the entire convention worrying about Saturday night. And it can really burn you out. That's why I'm taking a break. It became no fun since it turned from a hobby to a job you had to do it and get it right. There's a fine line between something you do for fun and something that you spend a lot of time on, but isn't fun.

I've had the chance to have other people to look up what I've been a part of. I think the neatest thing ever was going to a meeting and a guy asking if my group was coming this year because he always enjoyed our cosplay. It's neat to be part of something like that.

Why do you think so many girls cosplay?

I can be someone else and people will like me when I cosplay, not because of who I am, but because of how I'm dressed. It's like high school where you may not have a lot of friends, but if you have a decent costume people will want to take your picture. People aren't used to it which is why it's addictive, because it's something that a lot of people have never had.

You see girls who are 12 and 13 wearing things they should not be, but you can't tell how old they are when they're in costume – it gets ridiculous how much people will go out of their way to be scandalous to get attention. Guys will dress up as characters that they think girls will like, but girls do it a lot more for the shocked attention. A lot of times these younger girls go as part of a club and their parents have no idea what is going on.

What do you think of women's roles in video games and anime?

I think that to an extent it's really cool, 20 or 30 years ago all the super heroes were masculine. Even Wonder Woman was masculine. Now they've specialized, and a lot of costumes are all about sex. But, now it's our turn to shine again - at least we're not muscled down, we have really nice bodies and we're going to use them to get attention. I think it balances out.

I think the negative is when the younger girls do it without realizing what they're doing and that it is not to blame on cosplay but on the lack of their parents' guidance. I don't

know many video games that portray 12-year-olds as sex symbols, but younger girls wear costumes made for older characters. This is new to our parents' generation so it's hard for them. But, I think eventually it will go to the other extreme

How do you think cosplaying affects women's self-image?

I think that it can give a false sense of self-esteem. I think that a lot of girls go out there and, they have a nice body, but people want to take their picture only because they have a nice body and not anything else. Girls especially need to realize that they need to have self-esteem by being well-rounded and not just by physical appearance. Every girl loves the attention, but you need to realize that attention is nice but you need to realize what is attracting the attention. If you are mature enough to realize that, though, you are mature enough to realize the implications.

Where do you think cosplay is going to go in the future?

Cosplay has become more popular because the popularity of anime and video games has increased. While attendance has grown, it's not growing as fast as two or three years ago when it boomed. In five years attendance will decrease, and cosplay will as well. Last year there were 20 less conventions because they closed as attendance has gone down.

What would be your ultimate cosplay costume?

I would really like to do a mech [robot] costume but I would like to do it in a different way and make the costume like 10-feet-tall. It's harder than I can make right now, but if you're waking around in a 10 foot suit people are like, "oh my god."

Columns:

How Lara Croft betrayed my feminism

By: Lisa Pickoff-White

Jiggle, jiggle bounce.

Lara Croft was supposed to stand up to all the boys who thought girls couldn't game. She was going to take her guns and frag them off the schoolyard for me. Instead she, and her breasts, turned on me. All the boys could talk about were her jugs, not her guns.

What had my feminist heroine turned into?

Ever since Lara, video game companies have had no problem introducing female characters whose “assets” far outweigh any other aspects of their personalities or bodies. Yet, they claim that these are strong women because they can shoot guns just as well as the boys.

Great, so now I have to be smart, cute and a gymnast. That’s what these video games are really telling all the boys and girls who play them. I will admit that most guys fully realize that not all women are going to act like this. My male friends make fun of the metal thongs all the women wear in the second *Prince of Persia*. But, the marketing for these games still encourages the idea that all boys should want big breasts and gymnastic feats.

Even if these games only slightly affect boys, the girls are still watching. I remember taking cues from my guy friends about what the perfect woman was like, and trying to emulate her – and I’m sure I wasn’t the only one. I would still love to be a gun-toting kick-ass, model-perfect explorer. But, as a media-savvy adult I know what to really expect out of myself and my partners.

I can accept large breasted women as ninjas, archaeologists and snipers. What I cannot accept is the video game industry telling me that they are feminist role-models. Lara Croft comes from the same history as emaciated models on magazine covers. *Dead or Alive* can have its “jiggle mechanism,” just don’t tell me that these characters teach girls to be stronger.

Luckily, I believe people are becoming more media-savvy. My 13-year-old sister agrees that most boys don't really believe that girls like that exist – only “the stupid ones who no one would date anyway.” As more women game, and more men are offended at the gaming industry's assumption that any game with gratuitous sex will sell, maybe the industry will catch up with the rest of us. We want good games with good characters. Not just good looks.

Finding Princess Peach

By: Lisa Pickoff-White

"Thank you, Mario! But the princess is in another castle!" These are the words at the end of every level in *Super Mario Brothers* urging you to continue on.

I get home from work late at night, and after setting my bags down inevitably wander over to my computer. There's a message in my inbox from my latest job application. For a few moments I stare at it, wondering if this could be it: acceptance, worthiness, vindication. Could this be everything that four long, expensive years of college has led up to? Could this lead to my first real job? Could this be the beginning of the rest of my adult life? Hesitantly, I double-click the message and wait for gmail to process my future.

Thank you for your interest...

“But the princess is in another castle,” I mumble to my fish.

This is the story of my life. These are the words I hear as I search not for a princess in *Super Mario Brothers*, but for the clue that leads to my adult life. In my mind I still see Toad comes out of the castle it seems with every rejection notice; fireworks and victory at hand, and yet Mario always had to go one more level to find that elusive Princess. The last years of college, or any looming life-change, seem fraught with danger and I long for the protections common in video game worlds. I wish there was a save button, I wish that internship applications had magical mushrooms that make me grow. Yet, I cannot help but go back to that one phrase that taught me that I must always go on to the next level, searching for my postmodern princess.

Video games taught my generation that life is a quest and that we are all heroes. But, it also taught us that winning lies not in just beating the boss, but in anticipation and exploration. By the seventh level you knew Toad was going to announce that she wasn't there and you began to wonder if she existed at all. Should you stop playing? Is it worth the frustration of being beaten time and time again for something that is little more than a dream? How much more realistic could they *make* this game?

Then it dawns on you. It doesn't really matter if there is a princess, in fact, you almost hope there isn't. Because what is really fun about the game are the new worlds that lie beyond each castle and the wonders they contain. Shoes that make you fly, mushrooms that make you grow, internships that help you learn are what I really look for in the next

level. Once you find the princess, the game is over and it all ends, all the excitement and anticipation.

I want to find an internship and a job, I want to graduate. But, I realize that sometimes it is an agonizing process to get there. I enjoy what I have and imagine what level lies beyond every application I send out. Somewhere, my princess is out there – and I am going to save her. But in the meantime there are gold coins to collect, turtles to jump on and applications to send out.

Growing up with games

By: Lisa Pickoff-White

There is something missing in my apartment and life. There is a small empty space next to the DVD player, and my TV is getting lonely. The video game console is gone.

I haven't been without one since my parents eventually bought me a Sega Dreamcast. It came with *Sonic the Hedgehog*, which was great, but even better, were the games at my friend Liz's house. She had a Super Nintendo and we played *Donkey Kong Country* for hours. Even when we weren't playing the game we would talk about the characters. Very quickly I realized that these games were giving me something I really didn't have before: social currency with all the other kids. At the time I didn't realize that

was one of the reasons I wanted to play the Nintendo games and popular Sega games so much. But as a small girl, with a large imagination, the games gave me power over a totally different world, and one that my classmates could share in too. Exploring new levels was like finding a magical tree house. The characters also became my friends. Yoshi was just not a character, he had a dramatic back story of being kicked out of dinosaur-land. But Mario saved him, and so Yoshi decided to be Mario's faithful steed. Seriously, if you had asked me I could have given you made-up histories about most of the characters complete with family lineages. And I wasn't the only one.

We became too old for Barbies and action hero figures, but video games could stay with us, growing up with us.

Later in High School, most of my male friends loved games. Although the first-person-shooters never held much interest at first, puzzle fighting games like Tetris and role-playing games like Final Fantasy intrigued me. But, games were something I just did at friends' houses. After all I was a girl and didn't have enough time or the systems to practice at home.

Finally, I went to college and discovered the joy of spending hours, often late at night, pushing through different levels of all sorts of games: import Japanese star fighter games, music games with plastic guitars, giant robot games and some games that didn't make a bit of sense. I loved these games; it was like elementary school all over again where I could live in a secret tree house with my friends. Some students would go out to frat parties and get drunk; we would play through *Knights of the Old Republic* before anyone else could.

These games gave me a sense of accomplishment that real life never matched. I could save the world with my friends cheering me on in the background. No matter what I looked like or how weak I was, in a game I could always find that power-up and beat the bad guy. No matter who broke-up with me or what I got on an exam, Mario was always there for me.

Many people claim that games take us farther away from people, but I would argue that they bring us closer. Even when I game by myself, later I talk about that world and the struggle with friends. Even there is some competitiveness; most gamers are willing to help each other out and they love to debate solutions. Gamers are in it together. As a woman I am often offended by representations of my gender in games; but on the other hand, games give me power and confidence that real life does not. In *Halo 2*, I can shoot people just as well as any other gamer, even if I am a girl.

It was not until recently that I realized what an impact gaming had on my life. Without having a console in my apartment I can't revisit my old haunts anymore. I can't turn into a superhero anymore at the drop of a hat.

The average age of a gamer is now 29-years-old. We're a dissatisfied lot. There may be a real war out there, but often there does not seem like a lot I can do from my apartment. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, my friends and I who lived in Washington, D.C. pulled into our game worlds even more, yearning for a world as black and white as *Zelda* or *Super Mario Brothers*. Many of us donated blood and time. Many of us worked on the campaigns or covered them during this last election. We are not passive people. But, we are people who yearn for a better world, who wish we could just save this one by pressing buttons sequentially at a particular speed.

Despite the sexism inherent in certain games, I firmly believe that girls should be encouraged to participate in them. Games teach kids that we are all equal as the player. Games do not discriminate over whether the player is weak or strong, male or female. Even in fighting games where the female characters look like Playboy's latest pin-up – these characters are faster and sometimes even stronger than the male characters. For all their inherent flaws, games still provide a gleam of hope for female gamers, that we can be as equally strong or smart in the real world as in games one day too. I want to be Superman too.

When I moved into my own apartment my roommate didn't understand the constant urge I have to chase ghosts. But, maybe after playing enough at other friends, maybe she'll come around and want to be a superhero too.

Gender in video games: from cat girl to dominatrix

Video games are culturally influential. The gaming industry makes more money than Hollywood and players are far more involved with a game than a passive viewer of television or film. Perhaps the largest revolution in our culture is the interactivity of gaming. Players have the chance to partially interact and live in a world, often spending hours doing so, learning the rules and social norms. Since nothing exists in a vacuum, these social mores in games both come from our culture and reinforce them. Just as people learn customs from film, there is even more at stake in a game. If a player does not “act” correctly her character is either killed or unable to progress – these can feel like very real consequences. How we represent sexuality and gender in video games does matter; because not only are we introduced to how gender is represented at an early age in games, but also it is one of the few points at which someone can literally “play” at being someone else.

Genre

There are different types of games and each has its own rules and sexist tendencies. The main genres in gaming are: adventure, role-playing, first-person-shooter, simulation, fighting, sports, etc. Each of these types of games consists of different in-game "rules." Adventure games are the most well known, often considered exploratory. This genre consists of games such as the *Zelda*, *Mario Brothers* and *Tomb Raider* series. Often, these games feature comic characters investigating a new world that complete a

series of tasks. The games require both skill, there are difficult timed sequences, and intelligence, players must figure out different combinations to beat the final boss, to solve puzzles. Role-playing games are similar to adventure games, but the player often controls a team of characters. To advance the plot, the player makes different players talk and interact with the game world to find out what he or she must do solve whatever the current problem is – usually saving the world from some calamity. *Final Fantasy* is the most well-known role-playing game and has set the tone for most others. First-person-shooters are exactly what the name describes; the player controls one character who must shoot, beat or otherwise disable their opponent. Examples of this genre include *Counterstrike* and *Halo*. Simulation games mimic something in the real world, such as the Sims series that allows the user to control everything from family interactions to cities. Fighting games are often centered around boxing or martial arts, where there is a series of characters loosely held together with a thin plot who fight each other. *Mortal Kombat* and *Soul Calibur* are two popular series in this genre. There are as many different sports games as there are sports. Racing games are especially popular. Usually the player can customize an expensive car and see how fast they can make it around various courses with hazards in the way. Often players get to play as their favorite sports heroes and with expensive equipment.

Skin

A player has certain expectations from different genres on what to do and how different characters will act. Interestingly enough, there are always female characters even though some games may have no men. There are two types of avatars, playable

characters and NPCs, non-player characters. Female NPCs are often thrown in only to be eye-candy. Racing games are well-known for featuring "hot babes," who are often the only avatars a player will see on screen, since the driver is never shown to promote the illusion that "you" are driving the car. In these games women are extremely objectified to the point where they are as much the "prize" as any trophy or power-up. When the player completes certain tasks in record times, female avatars with more skin than clothing often come out to present the trophy. Never mind that the player may be a heterosexual female or gay male, looking at such air-brushed beauty is supposed to be a form of prize. The marketing of sports games is also usually very sexist, featuring scantily clad women fawning over everything from golf carts to race cars. One game, *Dead or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball*,¹ features entirely bikini clad women playing; the game includes the *Dead or Alive*² infamous "jiggle mechanism" where the player can adjust the physics engine that makes the women avatars' breasts bounce. Clearly, sports games are marketed toward heterosexual males, and the makers assume that busty female avatars will sell games. Some games even incorporate actual models as their presenter avatars. However, many male gamers find the women "lame" and a waste of time because of their large loading time.

Another controversial use of women lies in fighting games. *Dead or Alive*, the series that pioneered the jiggle mechanism, *Mortal Kombat* and *Soul Calibur* all feature scantily clad women. Somehow stilettos and short skirts are adequate protection for women who fight for a living. Characters, such as Ivy in *Soul Calibur II*,³ wear leather

¹ Team Ninja. *Dead or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball*. Tecmo. 2003.

² Team Ninja. *Dead or Alive II*. Tecmo. 2000.

³ Namco. *Soul Calibur II*. Namco. 2003.

thongs and corsets. As players accumulate points they can "buy" different outfits for the characters, with the women's clothing showing more nudity. There's even options to change the color of the underwear that women are wearing in *Capcom vs. SNK*,⁴ a combination of two popular fighting games, because the makers assume that players are looking up the female avatars skirts. An additional common feature in fighting games is images of the female characters in bikinis and underwear that the player unlocks when they reach certain levels. Because there is no real plot in fighting games, such power-ups are the only real, tangible reward the player can earn by playing the game repeatedly. As in sports games, the semi-nude female body is literally an object to be won. *Capcom vs. SNK* is one of the few games to recognize this sexist portrayal of women. When Mai is in a fight, the other characters make fun of her tremendous breasts that are barely covered by the robe that she wears. Often, she responds that it is her traditional garb and that she will prove her worth by beating her opponent. Obviously, both the makers and the players of these games are aware of the exaggerated female form in fighting games because these exchanges are funny and were meant to be funny.

Female characters fall into two stereotypes in fighting games, the cute little girl or the dominatrix. Xianghua and Ivy from *Soul Calibur II* are good representations of this extreme. Players can "taunt" other characters and special cut scenes when they win or lose. As a cute girl character Xianghua giggles or says lines such as "That was fun!" or "Am I being a meanie?" when she wins, but when she loses she goes down onto the floor to kick it like a three-year-old.⁵ The message is that you cannot take girls who fight seriously. On the other hand, Ivy as a dominatrix clearly uses her sexual skills and not her

⁴ Capcom Productions Studios. *Capcom vs. SNK*. Capcom. 2003.

⁵ Namco. *Soul Calibur II*. Namco. 2003.

fighting skills to win. All of Ivy's lines and scenes are extremely sexual: "It's useless to resist me," "Do you want more?" "There, are you satisfied now?" "You're quite lively. I like that," "I could keep going if you like," and "Squirm!" in case the player did not realize from her outfit that she is a sexual creature.⁶ Even her screams when she loses, greatly resemble an orgasm.

These stereotypes are problematic since they emphasize that women are not to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, the fighting genre is not the only one to use these stereotypes for their female characters. It is simply has the purest form of them because of the limited character development opportunities.

The Player

One of the problems with discussing video games is what model to use for criticism. While film theory is certainly applicable it is important to go further and examine how inhabiting a character changes affects the player who must actively participate at all times. Players do not simply look at images and receive messages from them; instead they inhabit the characters and their world, driving the action.

Some of the most popular games do not use purely human forms at all though. Adventure games and role-playing games tend to feature very cartoonish looking characters. Animal characters, such as Sonic, a hedgehog, or Ecco, a dolphin, are prevalent. Even characters such as Mario or Link do not necessarily look human; instead they resemble cartoons.

Pac Man, one of the most popular games of all time, features a circle with a mouth and *Tetris* does not even have a main character. These games tend to be more popular in

⁶ Namco. *Soul Calibur II*. Namco. 2003.

general and especially with women. One of the reasons may lie behind how we interact with the icon that represents us on screen and how games use symbols. "Good" games work because the world has consistent rules and symbols.⁷ For instance, many people enjoy the Mario games because throughout the world mushrooms are power-ups and gold coins are points; from a semiotic approach these images are true signs whose meaning has nothing to do with what they represent as an image. When games do not adhere to a system it frustrates the player because she does not know what to do or what things mean. Therefore, richly imagined and coherent signs are enjoyable. But, when these signs go against closely held rules of reality, it can be frustrating. In the *Resident Evil* games the player must deposit items in certain lock boxes throughout the game. No matter which box you deposited something in, it will appear in all boxes. Also, all objects take up the same amount of room, whether it is a small amount of herbs or a submachine gun. Although these are systematic rules and applied consistently, they are very frustrating because that is not the way things work and it breaks the "reality" of the game. Mushrooms and coins are taken for granted because the *Mario* games are not meant to represent any form of reality, whereas the *Resident Evil*⁸ games are, and therefore are not breaking any hard and fast rules of life that people encounter everyday.

There is then a large problem with how to represent the player in a game system because no matter what, that avatar is not going to represent how the player actually appears.⁹ In every game, whether it is Pac Man, where the avatar is a circle a truly

⁷ Poole, Steven. *Trigger Happy: Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000. 185-191

⁸ Capcom Production Studio 3. *Resident Evil*. Capcom. 1996.

⁹ Poole 221-222

symbolic symbol, or in *Tomb Raider*,¹⁰ where the avatar is a semi-realistic looking woman as an iconic symbol, there is a break in the "reality" of the game.¹¹ From gaming sales though, we can tell that people tend to like simpler representations of the player. The more "realistic" a character, the more the player realizes that she is not the avatar.¹² As a game and the player avatar look more realistic, it becomes less enjoyable in a sense – the problem is that people like visually stunning games set within a "fantasy" world that looks as though it could be real. *Tomb Raider* and the *Final Fantasy* games are good examples of this. How game developers work out this paradox is by slowly making the game worlds more complicated and moving places, as well as further animating all avatars, according to Poole. At the same time though, the designers of Lara Croft are purposely keeping her at a certain, lower pixel level they said to Poole because "Lara Croft must always remain no woman in particular, for that is her charm. And we don't really want in a video game to kill and mutilate very 'real' looking people; for the game to remain innocent, visceral fun, they must remain partial symbols, retain that computer look."¹³ This is also one of the reasons that first-person-shooters tend to only use a pair of hands to represent the player and why games with animal qualities are very popular.

It is also one of the reasons that women tend to prefer games with inhuman characters. *Sonic the Hedgehog*,¹⁴ *NiGHTS into Dreams*¹⁵ and *Ecco the Dolphin*,¹⁶ were just as popular as fighting and shooting games at the time. But, they had a much larger

¹⁰ Core. *Tomb Raider*. Eidos Interactive. 1996.

¹¹ Poole 200-203

¹² *Ibid.* 202

¹³ *Ibid.* 202

¹⁴ Sonic Team. *Sonic the Hedgehog*. Sega Japan. 1991.

¹⁵ Sonic Team. *NiGHTS: Into Dreams*. Sega Japan. 1996.

¹⁶ Sega of America. *Ecco the Dolphin*. Sega of America. 1992.

female audience, partially because it was not obvious whether the main character was a male or female. In the beginning of *NiGHTS* the player chooses a gender, but as the game progresses and the character turns into Nights, it becomes androgynous. All of these games were very popular with girls at the time, according to Lee McEnany Caraher vice president of corporate and consumer communications of Sega in 1998.¹⁷ Women can integrate themselves easily into the games because the game does not remind them constantly how women are supposed to look. One of the main problems with women and playing Lara Croft is that women know very well what an impossible body that she has, and therefore compare themselves to her. This is dangerous because it emphasizes negative views of body image.¹⁸ If Lara Croft was real, she would not have enough space for all her bodily organs. Lara is not meant to represent a real woman though, she is the result of the objectified woman created by male game designers. She disturbs the female player because the player is forced through point-of-view to look at the player avatar through the "male gaze." Players cannot view their own avatar alone, instead they watch her with a team of designers showing them where to look. Therefore, in a sense, the player herself is objectified, she cannot escape the largeness and sexuality of Lara's breasts since she is forced to look at them from a certain view. Although players can change where Lara goes, they cannot change how the designers presented her in the forefront of the screen.¹⁹ This same problem arises every time there is an overly sexualized, semi-realistic, female avatar from *Tomb Raider* to *Dead or Alive*.

¹⁷ Caraher, Lee McEnamy. "An Interview with Lee McEnany Caraher." *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. Ed. Justine Cassel and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998. 192-212. 200.

¹⁸ Carr, Diane. "Playing with Lara." *ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*. Ed. Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska. New York: Wallflower Press, 2002. 171-180. 178.

¹⁹ Carr 172.

Control

Who the player is also becomes problematic in game construction, especially in role-playing games. Most games work under the assumption that the player is a heterosexual male, and deal accordingly by making the main player character male and the love interest female. This obviously becomes problematic for women and gay men who are then forced by the meta-narrative to move their character in ways that they would not naturally, thereby disrupting the reality of the game. Being able to explore a world at will is one of the greatest joys of role-playing games. The player chooses dialogue from a script and can direct a conversation in different ways, while choosing where to go in the world. In some games, the player can control a group of characters and in others only one. Often, the plot is directed to a point though, if the player does not make the "right" choices the game cannot go forward and often important moments are illustrated through cinematic cut-scenes over which the player has no direct control.

The *Final Fantasy* series is one of the most well-known and is a good example of forced gender roles. In *Final Fantasy IX*²⁰ the main character is a swashbuckling cat-pirate, Zidane, who really likes to flirt with girls. One of the main plots of the series involves him falling in love with the princess Garnet so that the two can save the world. Without the two working together as a couple, the plot cannot move forward. No matter what the player chooses during certain dialogues the game will progress to romantic cut-scenes between the characters. Since role-playing games often take a very long time to get through the player becomes very attached to her character. After awhile, it really does

²⁰ Square Company Limited. *Final Fantasy IX*. Square Company. 2000.

seem as if you are the character and must keep playing to save the world, the player genuinely cares about the fate of her character and the people she is trying to save. Game designers rarely give characters multiple lives, if the player avatar dies the player must start over, just to make sure that the player becomes emotionally attached to her avatar. It becomes awkward though for a straight female, or gay male, to be forced into *liking* a female avatar just to get through the game. Also, traditional women's roles are clearly enforced in the game. Garnet has to try to be more feminine by wearing a skirt so that no one notices that she is more than a regular girl.²¹ These games do not allow for true gender experimentation, because although they allow the player greater control over minor choices, the main plot almost always enforces gender norms. Gaming, especially in role-playing games, is one of the only chances people have to "play" at being someone from another gender. After spending hours under a character's skin, the player associates the reactions of that character with how any woman would act, just as they draw information about how a wizard would act. Square Limited has sold more than 33 million units of *Final Fantasy* games - that is a lot of people who are forced to act within certain boundaries set by a company that espouses its games for the freedom of choice they offer their players.

Marketing

Clearly, women are not portrayed well in video games. Even what few females are portrayed intelligently, they possess ridiculous bodies. Yet, women do play video games in increasing numbers. According to a survey conducted in 2003 by the

²¹ Consalvo, Mia. "Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances." *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. New York: Routledge, 2003. 171-194. 174-178.

Entertainment Software Association, a group funded by the entertainment industry, women purchase 57 percent of computer games and 47 percent of console games.²² This is up almost 20 percent from their much cited poll in 1999. While there are some questions concerning the accuracy of their poll, no matter what the number of women buying games is, there is no doubt that they currently make-up a large percent of the market. Even if many of these women are mothers purchasing games for their children, they are still looking at sexist covers and buying the games.

Not only is the cover art sexist, but the marketing in general. While working on this paper, I interviewed several women gamers from different parts of America. All were angry at the way women were portrayed in games and had friends who cited the extremely violent game *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*,²³ where the player punches prostitutes to regain health and the objectification of Lara Croft's body as reasons why they do not play. Both of these instances are victims of marketing and laziness though. It takes more effort to create and market an interesting complex game and unfortunately, game makers realized that violence is not only a good marketing tool, but easy to make. Therefore, games like *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* are created because all the makers need to do is show people shooting at each other and prostitutes and people will buy the game.²⁴ Especially since women still buy video games without companies even spending money to market toward them.²⁵ Because video games cost a large amount of money to

²² Entertainment Software Association. <http://www.theesa.com/pressroom.html>

²³ DMA Design. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. Rockstar Games. 2001.

²⁴ Dyer-Witherford, Nick, Stephen Kline and Greig de Peuter. *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. 246-255.

²⁵ Caraher 194-195

produce, the people who sell them would rather have products with sex and violence that they know will sell, then create better games.

Therefore, the marketing and creation of games becomes a vicious cycle reinforcing the notion of what needs to be in a game. Images of women are appropriated to sell any game. At E3, the annual convention to market new games, companies hire "booth babes," models dressed in small outfits, to hang around booths for games ranging from *Final Fantasy* to sports games. While Eidos claimed that it was a step forward for feminism, because Lara Croft had a doctorate and could kick ass too, it marketed Lara on the cover of magazines naked with Duke Nukem, a hero of a first-person-shooter. Likewise, in celebration of the news that the average age of a gamer is 29-years-old the October 2004 edition of *Playboy* features a foldout and other pictures of partially-nude video game characters.²⁶ Clearly, gaming companies want "to keep their newest target demographic happy, the digital diversions of 2004 are packed with more hot women, fast cars and big guns than ever before."²⁷ By having strong female characters, i.e. ones with guns, in their games, the gaming industry can claim that it is trying to integrate women into the gaming culture. However, with marketing clearly objectifying women they clearly do not really care about how people see the female body. Perhaps most disturbing is the rise of women associated with violence in marketing such as in the magazine cover with Lara Croft and Duke Nukem, a character who is regularly sexist and likes to throw nuclear missiles at people. By having his hands covering her breasts, the editors show that he is in charge of even this powerful woman.

²⁶ "Gaming Grows Up." *Playboy*. Ed. Hugh Hefner. October, 2004: Playboy Enterprises International, Inc. 88-94.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 88

While this cover was for issue on sex and video games, neither company complained about having their logo used as such. On the Web sites of both companies it is easy to find provocative screensavers and wallpapers of Duke Nukem cavorting with women or Lara writhing around.

Marketing Lara this way only encourages the fans only who then create "cracks" of the game, so that you can play with Lara nude.²⁸ People who spend this much time working on games, later end up creating them, and more of the same, such as in the case of the extremely popular *Counterstrike* that originated as a hack of *Half-Sign* and eventually became a popular, published game on its own.²⁹ Games that use women as prizes, sports games, or worse, as people to enact violence on, *Grand Theft Auto*, are just part of the same cycle that comes from the misguided notion that only men buy games and that they will only buy games with sex and violence.

Grrl Games vs. Girl Games

To counteract these sexist portrayals of women a series of "girl game" companies began to emerge in the mid-90s to create games for girls. After Mattel had a huge success with *Barbie Fashion Designer*, which sold more than 500,000 copies in the first two months, more than *Doom* or *Quake*, people began to see games for girls as a viable source of income.³⁰ One of the most well-known of these entrepreneurial feminist companies is Purple Moon that releases cartoonish games about girls' interactions in high school and other social environments. The idea was to provide content that girls will

²⁸ Dyer-Witherford 264.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 252-253.

³⁰ Cassel, Justine and Henry Jenkins. "Chess for Girls? Feminism and Computer Games." *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. Ed. Justine Cassel and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998. 1-45. 15.

enjoy, and in most cases this tends to be through deciding on how to interact in social situations and "self-construction."³¹ To Brenda Laurel, the head of Purple Moon, and those like her think girls need games that they can relate to in order to gain the skills that they need to compete in the computer-centered world today. Most of these games were marketed to eight-to-twelve-year-old girls, and some older demographics. Rarely, do they have realistic visuals and often stick to exploratory and role-playing formulas with very little fighting and a small amount of puzzle solving. McKenzie & Co. is another such company who went out and surveyed 2000 girls on what they would want in a video game and the most common responses were " 'cute guys, dating, shopping, telephone conversations, a prom and music."³² The company made a game that revolved around choosing who date in high school, etc. None of these companies have done very well though, especially because they are competing with groups like Mattel who ship out games revolving around current "girl products." Purple Moon probably only had 5.7 percent of the girls market in 1998 and had accumulated losses of more than \$45 million at the time. One of the problems is that retail companies still see girls as a negligible market and therefore only have a small space for "girl games" that tends to be dominated by companies like Mattel.³³

Also, these games only seem to reinforce the same gender stereotypes that feminists critiqued *Final Fantasy* of doing. Another movement is the militaristic Grrl Gamers, where groups of women actively participate in violent video games specifically

³¹ Laurel, Brenda. "An Interview With Brenda Laurel." *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. Ed. Justine Cassel and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998. 118-135. 124.

³² Furger, Roberta. *Does Jane Compute? Preserving Our Daughters' Place in the Cyber Revolution*. New York: Warner Books, 1998. 54.

³³ Dyer-Witherford 260-261

to beat the boys. Many first-person-shooters, such as *Quake*, *Counterstrike*, and *Doom*, allow for "clans" of people to come together and fight each other. Women proudly proclaim their gender and have "fragging parties" where they form women-only clans to fight men with names such as Psycho Men Killers, Crack Whores, Clan PMS and Riot Grrls. They also form allegiances on massively-multiplayer online games such as *Everquest* and *Ragnarok*. Most of these groups see that games for girls keep girls from cultivating much needed anger to break through the glass ceiling or feel that violent games can act as an outlet for the frustration of everyday life. One "Cybergrrl" proclaimed that people need "a 'glass ceiling' game for women, where they can take an array of automatic weapons to oppressive corporate offices."³⁴ These women are having an effect though, after one group made a hack for *Half-Life* so that avatars could be female, the company came out with semi-realistic looking female avatars. How the avatars look, in this game and others, is of serious significance to most of these women. Many see Lara Croft, and others like her, as impossibly ideal women who "are superfit, agile gymnasts with enough stamina to run several marathons back to back."³⁵ Others argue that no one can take female avatars seriously, even if they have a doctorate and can kick ass, "when they look like strippers with guns and seem nothing more than an erection waiting to happen."³⁶ Also, they argue that girl gaming companies are not marketing toward the current audience, since the average gamer is now 29.

³⁴ Sherman, Aliza. "Voices from the Combat Zone: Game Grrlz Talk Back." *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. Ed. Justine Cassel and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998. 334-335.

³⁵ Jones, Cal. "Voices from the Combat Zone: Game Grrlz Talk Back." *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. Ed. Justine Cassel and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998. 338-339.

³⁶ Goulet, Michelle. "Voices from the Combat Zone: Game Grrlz Talk Back." *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. Ed. Justine Cassel and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998. 339-441

Conclusion

There is something wrong when companies malign half their audience. Companies need to create good games. Instead of relying on sex and violence as standbys companies need to concentrate on making interesting games that challenge people's physical and mental abilities. Creative games, like *Myst*, *Super Mario World* and *Zelda* have sold just as well, if not better than overly violent and sexist games. More importantly they made a safe space for everyone to play in, one that did not emphasize impossible attributes, objectification or violence. These games prove that girls and boys are not really that different in the end. All children want to explore a new world and work out interesting puzzles, whether that is the combo moves needed to get past a hard boss or a mental puzzle. While playing they can explore what it is like to be a girl or a boy, when given sufficient options, and learn that they too can succeed. Even as adults, we want the same thing. The interactions in games are important because they mirror the interactions we want to have in real life. It is much better to learn to want to work together to save a world than to shoot things while wearing an impossible body. Though violent games may have their place as regulated ways to take out aggression, they do not need to link sex with violence in either the game characters or marketing. It does not even make good business sense anymore to alienate half a potential market. No matter what angle you look at it, there is no reason for games to be sexist.