

# The Social Impact of Gender and Games

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## INTRODUCTION

An increasingly important area of gender and information technology is that of Internet, computer, and video games. Besides women increasingly playing conventional entertainment-oriented or role-playing games, there are a number of pertinent developments in gaming. They are adver-games, casual games, games for change or “serious” games, and games aimed at women and/or developed by women.

Computer and video games are a significant area of interest for a number of reasons. In the United States, games generate substantially more annual revenue than motion picture exhibition, totalling over \$11 billion for three consecutive years from 2002 to 2004 (Hollywood Game Daemon, 2004; Traiman, 2005). Research by the Entertainment Software Association indicates that:

*half of all Americans play computer and video games, with women making up the second largest (demographic) group of gamers. Games are steadily becoming a dominant way that people spend their leisure time, often stealing time away from traditional media, like television. (Games for change mentioned at NYC Council Hearing, 2005)*

In addition, games often reinforce traditional gender roles (Cassells & Jenkins, 2000) and reproduce negative racial and ethnic stereotypes, even as male players comfortably assume female identities (Baker, 2002). As greater numbers of consumers spend time gaming, the advertising industry has taken notice and is following the population into the game world with advertising. The game enthusiasts comprise a desirable target, freely spending on games and other products. Gamers spend an estimated \$700 a year per capita on games (Gamers are spending 700 dollars a year, 2005).

## CONTROVERSIAL ASPECTS OF ENTERTAINMENT-ORIENTED GAMES

While many games are designed to entertain players involve team and individual sports, car racing, and life simulators such as “Sim City” and “The Sims” do not fundamentally disturb the guardians of public morality. “The Sims” and “Sims 2” permit players to guide simulated beings through their daily lives in cyberspace (Surette, 2005). Another segment that has traditionally attracted the attention of the majority of players is marked by violence and sexual stereotypes. The impact of this category of game has stimulated such controversy that laws have been passed to ban the sale of games depicting violence against law enforcement officials, and guidelines governing game sales to minors have been imposed by retailers (Carlson, 2005; Morris, 2003; Muir, 2004). At least one study indicates that exposure to violent video games even leads to increased short term aggressive behavior in young women (Anderson & Murphy, 2003). Another study, an online survey, tested the hypothesis that an aggressive personality is attracted to aggressive video games, and that women are less likely to play computer games because they are socialized to be less aggressive. Women who used the computer but did not play games and women gamers were subjects of the survey. Women who played computer games perceived their online environments as “less friendly but experienced less sexual harassment online, were more aggressive themselves, and did not differ in gender identity, degree of sex role stereotyping, or acceptance of sexual violence” (Norris, 2004) when compared against the non-gaming women.

Many IT professionals trace their interests in the field to their childhood exposure to games (Kaji, 2002). Gorski (2001) finds this link unfortunate given that most entertainment-oriented games depict women as “damsels in distress or sideshow prostitutes.”

More than half of girls and women do not find in games a hospitable environment and, thus, miss an early opportunity to enter the computer science education and career pipeline enjoyed by their male counterparts. A game blogger site reported that an IT manager's game recently released by Intel had to be withdrawn because it did not give players the option to hire women (Water Cooler Games, 2004).

## **WOMEN'S USE OF CONVENTIONAL COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAMES**

In a very real sense, a kind of gender "digital divide" has tended to exist in the gaming environment. Specifically, the rift between boys and girls begins to widen as early as kindergarten (Agosto, 2004). The action-orientation of hard-core gaming has favored boys, male adolescents, and young men. However, this situation has begun to change. Despite the often unwelcoming environment historically posed by the gamescape, many girls and women are increasingly drawn to a number of games. ABC News (2005) recently reported that women enjoy video games for the same reasons men do—for excitement and competition. The report went on to cite video game experts who credited a single game title, "The Sims," for helping to change the gaming industry "virtually overnight." Earning \$3 billion last year, half of the game's players are women.

Other gender issues in computer and video games have to do with marketing and content. The Women's Game Conference scheduled for October 2005 includes the site and process of women's purchase of games and the message—"marketing can hurt as well as help." Girls learn early that games are marketed and designed for boys. A number of studies indicate that games are perceived as "boys' toys" and "the disconnect between many computer games available today and girls' game content and design preferences" (Agosto, 2004). Another topic planned for the conference is the representation of women in ads. The literature indicates that the portrayal of characters in games can influence girls' interest in games. Most of the characters are male, and female characters are portrayed negatively. Content issues planned include the importance of art for female players and

female entertainment criteria (Women's Game Conference, 2005).

## **CASUAL GAMES AND GENDER**

BBC News recently reported that a research firm found that while hardcore online gaming continues to be dominated by young men, "bored housewives" are stimulating the growth of other game categories available on the Internet (BBC News, 2004). Female players constitute two thirds of the growing market in such skill games as cards, solitaire, and puzzles. This segment is termed casual games.

In contrast to hard-core gamers, casual gamers are classified as those who have played online games within the last three months (Twist, 2005). Even though men spend more time on the Internet each week than women (23.2 vs. 21.6 hours), female gamers over 40 spend the greatest time per week playing online games (9.1 hours or 41% of their online time vs. 6.1 hours—26% of their online time—for men).

In order to serve this growing market, women are being recruited to create games attractive to women. Women gamers are viewed as intelligent players who like a challenge and strategy (ABC News, 2005). At the same time, the future of growth in video gaming depends on the development of easier user interfaces. One of the key players in Canadian digital entertainment is Ana Serrano, director of Habitat New Media Lab, the interactive think tank at the Canadian Film Centre (Seguin, 2005). Among her responsibilities is growing the video game industry.

## **THE GAMES FOR CHANGE OR SERIOUS GAMES MOVEMENT AND GENDER**

The games for change or "serious" game movement consists of video and computer games being used as tools for social change rather than as mere entertainment. The serious games initiative "focuses on uses for games in exploring management and leadership challenges facing the public sector" (Muir, 2005, p. 4). Further, the initiative seeks to link the electronic

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