Chapter 7
Gaming as a Woman:
Gender Difference Issues in Video Games and Learning

Kristen B. Miller
Tuskegee University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports the findings of two surveys taken by players of the video game Rock Band. The purpose of the surveys was to determine what differences, if any, exist between the ways that males and females learn to play the game, are motivated to improve, interact with other players both online and in real life, and interact with other players in online communities for the game. This study suggests that while females do not appear to learn to play this game much differently from males, they are motivated differently and interact with other players differently, and ultimately they have a harder time than males finding a place in the affinity groups that exist for the game, and these findings provide starting points for teachers who intend to use video games and virtual worlds for educational purposes in guarding against creating a "gender gap" between males and females.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the recent scholarship in video games has been concerned with the connections between video games and learning, either how video games could be used to teach (DeMaria, 2007) or how quality classroom teaching could be modeled after how video games teach (Gee, 2003; Selfe & Hawisher, 2007). Much of why video games serve as a model of good teaching is because they inspire a lot of motivation, dedication, and willingness to fail on the part of the player. If you can bottle up what it is that inspires a player to work hard and excel at a video game and apply it in the classroom, imagine the improvements to education. Little attention, however, has been given to whether or not males and females learn and play video games differently. Beyond one essay in Selfe and Hawisher's *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century*, most attention I've found

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given to gender differences in these type of works has concerned the content of the games—their portrayal of women—rather than how female players might engage with them differently, and the subsequent effect this might have on work that seeks to model classroom teaching after video games. That one essay, "Gender Matters: Literacy, Learning, and Gaming in One American Family" by Pamela Takayoshi (2007), addresses one primary aspect of women learning video games, that of the role of affinity groups. Takayoshi makes the observation that video games are more of a communal experience for females than for males, and yet at the same time observes that females are much more cut off from the larger gaming community. That the communal experience of it is central for females fits well with the work of Elizabeth Flynn, who argues in "Composing as a Woman" (1988) that, at least in writing, the male wants to set himself apart from others while the female wants to make connections with others. In this study, I set out to see what differences, if any, exists between the way males and females play one particular video game, Rock Band, a music simulation game that allows players to play along as guitar, bass, drums, or vocals to rock songs at difficulties ranging from easy to expert. Overall, the results of this study fit the findings of Takayoshi and Flynn, suggesting that females tend to focus on and be motivated by the connective aspects of this video game, and yet at the same time, do not seem to feel as welcome in the larger Rock Band or general gaming community, and these are issues that must be taken into account in any attempt to include video games or even instruction modeled after video games in an educational setting.

BACKGROUND

In his 2003 work *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee makes the suggestion that video games should become a tool for improving education. Gee makes the case that playing and improving at video games is a literate practice that follows patterns similar to learning real-life skills, and that many games are designed well enough to motivate the player through many failures in order to acquire the skills necessary to succeed. Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher follow up on Gee's ideas with their 2007 collection *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century*, which looks at individual gamers from many demographics "to offer historical and cultural analyses of their literacy development, practices, and values" (p. 1). Together, through their examination of gaming as a type of literacy, these works suggest two primary purposes to this vein of inquiry: modeling our teaching methods after those utilized in the design of video games and actually using games and similar virtual worlds to teach.

In *Reset: Changing the Way We Look at Video Games* (2007), Rusel DeMaria likewise discusses the potential for using video games in education, but focuses primarily on the latter of these possibilities, using games to teach, while still providing a thorough examination of those elements of games that provide such potential for adaptation to educational purposes: motivation, self-assessment, repetition, and experimentation. Regarding motivation, DeMaria lists the seven motivational factors identified in 1987 by M.R. Lepper and T.W. Malone—"challenge, curiosity, control, fantasy, competition, cooperation, and recognition"—and singles out control as "one of the most powerful and unique aspects of video games" (p. 50). It would seem that video games have the potential to offer all seven of those motivational factors, demonstrating the appeal of using them in an educational setting. DeMaria further explains that he believes that "video games have found a powerful formula for motivating people" and that "the basic elements of this formula are goals, challenges, and rewards" (p. 51). Focusing in particular on the element of challenge, he believes that because they acknowledge the "human propensity to seek and resolve challenges" that