

The Gaming World and Women

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In order to gain an insight into the differences across gender within the gaming scene, I chose to immerse myself in the culture and witness first-hand what the role of women is within the gaming world.

Gaming is often seen as an activity undertaken by men. Over time, more and more women have become involved in gaming. However, it is difficult to say whether this is due to changes in the way gaming is marketed, or an increase in the desire to draw women into the gaming world due to the creation of more enticing content (Hayes 2005). This opens up a greater number of questions about the differences between women and their male counterparts when it comes to participation in gaming.

Personal Account

I explored these gender differences by attending a number of sessions of gaming run by a group of young adults ranging from 16 to 23 years of age. Straight away I began to notice a clear distinction between the males and females, within this group of gamers. Women, from what I observed, seemed to be drawn more towards massive multiplayer online (MMO) role-playing games, which enabled them to become immersed in the character development throughout the story. This was a clear separation between men and women, as the men were seemingly drawn towards first-person shooter (FPS) games. While observing the gameplay of various role-playing MMOs, I noticed an interesting occurrence; the portrayal of characters within the games also appeared to play a role in the gender division. Indeed, many women appeared to play not only the female characters offered but also the male roles. The few men who played also appeared to cross the gender barriers within the game.

Research

There has been little research done into the role of gender within gaming. However, one study conducted by Dill and Thill (2007) looked into the depiction of males and females within a game. They found that men were more often portrayed as aggressive 83% of the time, when compared to females, who were shown as aggressive 62% of the time. This study also found that women within a game are sexualised 60% of the time as opposed to 1% of the time for men, and women were quite often skimpily dressed 39% of the time. The way in which women are portrayed within the games may impact on the choice of game by both males and females. Females leaning toward role-playing MMOs may feel more comfortable because there is less need for aggression and less need to alter the way in which males and females are portrayed. Thus, the concept of the prevalence of 'gender

roles' (Loue & Sajatovic 2008) is evident within the concept of gaming across genders. It is also believed that children are treated differently depending on gender, and the roles adopted at a younger age tend to be maintained as these individuals grow. Thus, the influence placed on these individuals as they grow influences what type of games they play. It is clear within the marketing of games that role-playing MMOs are often more geared towards females, while many games that men choose to play are advertised as aggressive, strong and highly 'masculine', which is ingrained into men from early on as being important (McDonald & Park 1986).

Personal Account

At one of the gaming sessions I attended, I saw many women partaking in first-person shooter games with their male counterparts. This suggests that what I witnessed in previous gaming sessions is not as defining in the separation of genre by gender. Many women within this culture seem to be quite open to – and in fact wanted to – participate in the same games as their male counterparts. They played alongside the men and in many cases were as good, or better than, the males they played with and against. However, also obvious was the difference in numbers between men and women. There were far fewer women present for this gaming session amongst the group observed than men.

Feminism In Gaming

It is highly possible that the role of feminism is showing itself within this (perhaps hidden) desire to partake in male-oriented games by women. As put forward by Beavis and Charles (2007), 'women appear to continue to position themselves as gamers, only relative to the position of men.' One of the women interviewed by Beavis and Charles, Yvonne, gave several reasons why women engage in first-person shooters on a lesser basis than males. She said that a woman talking about first-person shooters comes across as too violent when speaking to other females. Yvonne asserts that women think differently to men and therefore cannot compete on the same level but still find the game addictive. Many of the women interviewed by Beavis and Charles chose to identify themselves as having masculine characteristics within their personality. This shows a clear separation between the expectation of women within the gaming world and the actual enjoyment experienced. Hayes (2005) discusses gender stereotypes in gaming. She explores how games that involve shopping or activities that are seen to be female-focused are advertised and encouraged for women to play, while those that are seen as masculine are heavily targeted for the male audience. So women are expected to partake in games that do not contain violence and aggression and therefore avoid such games, or at the very least do not admit to playing them.

Final Personal Account

Throughout this session, I witnessed a different side of what women experience when taking part in the same type of games that men play. Women were prone to severe ridicule and harassment by male gamers with whom they played. The ridicule and harassment came not as much from those who were present in the same room, but a great deal from those they played with and against online. Repeatedly women were put down and ridiculed when they made an error or struggled within the game. At the same time they were, in many ways, more harshly harassed when they appeared to be doing well or better than the men; often being told that it was either a fluke or that they must not be women as they were doing so well.

Conclusion

When surveyed, women admitted they felt as if the online environment was less friendly when they participated in online gaming (Norris 2005). The results of this study showed that women do in fact encounter a high rate of hostility when participating online. However, the results also showed that there are a greater number of women in online gaming than people often realise. Thus, women may choose to avoid the online gaming world that is male-oriented, in order to avoid the ridicule and harassment. Women being subjected to unnecessary harassment by men within the gaming world create the stereotype that the entire gaming world is hostile toward female gamers. Thus, women will continue to take a step back when contributing to, and competing in, online games that are seen to be male-oriented. Until women are aware of the number of other women who are playing, or would like to partake in online games, women will continue to step back and away from the online gaming world.

The portrayal of women within video games is still creating a separation across genders within the gaming scene, with men seen as aggressive, while women are largely sexualised. However, the increase in women not only partaking in gaming but also across the varying genres of games available, is contributing to the breakdown of stereotypes attributed to women within the gaming scene. The number of women participating in online gaming is still under-reported and therefore women still withdraw or hide their interest in the gaming world and, in particular, male-oriented games. Women play a crucial role within the gaming scene and without women to break through the stereotypes themselves, there would be no way for the existing stereotypes to be broken down; nor would the stereotypes of gamers and girl-gamers from the external world be altered.

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About the author

I chose to study at university as it provided an opportunity to learn, especially from a range of topics that enabled me to widen my experiences. The opportunities to learn about people and the world and the things within was an appealing draw-card for me. I would ideally like to take up work with the government or continue on to further my studies.