Games and Gender
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One of the more interesting paradoxes within the existing computer games literature is that while the majority of players are reputed to be male, most of the critical attention directed at questions of gaming and gender has focused on girls and women. For some researchers these issues are important because the marginalisation of girls and women within gaming culture is sexist and thus reflects troubling inequalities in society more generally. Other analysts, particular those focusing on equity and education, have proposed that the use of leisure software including computer games could help to interest girls and young women in technology, science and maths related subjects (see Gorriz and Medina, 2000, Gansmo, Nordli and Sorensen, 2003). There is concern that girls avoid these subjects at school, with the consequence that women are not entering related high-status professions. Some game producers and designers, meanwhile, have studied girls and gaming because they have an interest in expanding and diversifying their audience. (Laurel 1999, Graner-Ray, 2003)

As this suggests, issues of girls, gender and games have been tackled by an array of theorists with different interests, motivations, methods, and professional backgrounds. In order to introduce these debates in this chapter we will touch on questions of representation, players and player culture, as well as aspects of the games industry. When it comes to questions of gender and computer games, it would be possible, and valid, to limit our discussion to the analysis of representations of the gendered body onscreen. Yet, if meaning (as in ‘the meaning of an image’) is associated with interpretation and reception, we also need to be looking at the player. Players (and analysts, of course) are informed by and situated within social and cultural contexts. In addition to this, computer games are developed, published, publicised and distributed by an industry that has typically addressed a male audience. In this chapter, therefore, issues of text, gender and representation will be introduced, and followed by a consideration of contexts: contexts of reception, and contexts of production.

Games as representations

A report titled Chicks and Joysticks (Krotoski, 2004) recently published by the Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers Association (ELSPA) contains statistical data on female players. The figures show that more males play than females, but only in certain countries, and not in all genres, and that the ‘average age of British female gamers is 30-35 years old. They represent 27.2% of UK gamers [and on] average they spend 7.2 hours per week playing games’ (p.11). Patterns of gender and gaming vary significantly from country to country, and this suggests that gender alone is not a
consistent predictor of gaming habits: ‘Internationally, British women play less than games-dedicated countries like the US, Japan and Korea where 39%, 36% and an astounding 65.9% play respectively.’ (p.10) As these figures make apparent, women and girls do play games, and it would be a mistake to associate computer gaming solely with children or teenagers. Despite this, in the public imagination games remain ‘the preserve of adolescent boys’ (Krotoski 2004: 6). Other research has found that women gamers do not necessarily regard computer gaming as a male hobby, but they did feel that many non-players viewed it as a boy’s pastime (Kerr 2003:283).

Some theorists have argued that representational factors – the ‘look’ of female avatars - are partially responsible for alienating women and girls from computer games (see Bryce and Rutter, 2002, for a review of ‘content analysis’ literature). It is arguable that until fairly recently females were planted in games either as rewards (titillating décor) or as goals (princesses to be rescued). Over the past few years however, the range and availability of female avatars has expanded to the point that this is no longer a straightforward, viable claim (see www.womengamers.com for a discussion of ‘digital women’). In many, although not all, RPGs the player is given the option to select the gender of the protagonist. In some MMORPGs (as we noted while discussing Anarchy Online) the player’s choices might extend to details of the avatar’s physique – from body weight and height, to hairstyle. Other online multiplayer RPGs might not offer the same degree of flexibility. T.L. Taylor’s (2003) research into women, pleasure and gaming shows that the ability to shape an avatar’s body (or the necessity of accepting the body types provided) is indeed an issue for women players of online multiplayer games. Taylor studied the game Everquest (an MMORPG with a fantasy setting), and found that ‘women in EQ often struggle with the conflicting messages around their avatars, feeling they have to ‘bracket’ or ignore how they look’ (Taylor, 2003:36). Both male and female avatars in the game have exaggerated physiques, but exaggeration in the case of the female avatars is specifically sexual, and while ‘chests and biceps on male characters act as symbolic sexual characteristics, they are simultaneously able to represent power…large breasts only act as sexual markers’ (Taylor, 2003:39).

There are many game-worlds where the highly ‘marked’ or marginal, or altogether absent gender is female. As we noted in Chapter 11, all the characters in The Thing are male. In the game Abe’s Oddysee (the action adventure game discussed in Chapter 10), it might be argued that the protagonist Abe and his alien brethren are androgynous or neuter but - as the name ‘Abe’ makes plain - the game is actually quite clear that the protagonist is male (although fans might ‘read’ against this). The masculinity modelled by Abe is of a different style than the masculinity of the game’s broad shouldered, bullying master race, the Glukkons – but the point is that maleness seems to permeate the game’s population as a more-or-less universal characteristic; as a neutral, default category. This implies that femaleness is somehow ‘difficult’. It has been argued that the attainment of a ‘neutral identity’ within a culture– whether it is maleness, or indeed whiteness (Dyer 1997, hooks 1992) - is linked with the power to define, and it is always and only ever possible from a position of power relative to the ‘marked’ and the marginal. Judith Butler argues that ‘only the feminine gender is marked, that the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex
and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood. (Butler 1990:9, referring to de Beauvoir).

Representational factors in games cannot be ignored, yet such considerations need to be reconciled with the fact that computer games are actualised through play: the user is a player, as well as a viewer, a reader, a consumer and a spectator. At first glance theories of representation and identification developed within Film Studies would seem to offer viable models for the analysis of avatar gender, or the impact of avatar gender on player ‘identification’ or ‘projection’ – but this is not necessarily the case. Playing an RPG or action adventure game might well involve gazing at a gendered body as it leaps across a screen, but at the level of the apparatus (a projector and camera vs. a computer, keyboard or joystick), and in terms of the conditions of participation (gazing or viewing vs. playing and manipulating) film viewing and computer gaming are very different activities. As mentioned in Chapter 5, degrees of recognition between off-screen user and onscreen body may arise during gaming, as when we lean over in vicarious response to gravity in a game-world, for example, but as yet these resonances are under-theorised. It would be difficult to establish, at this point, if the object on screen evoking recognition in this way even has to be humanoid – let alone representative of a particular gender.

As this indicates, satisfactory conceptualisations of the player-as-gendered-subject manipulating the game-as-text are not yet available. For this reason, assertions that commercial games necessarily entail ‘homogenising effects on the viewer/user’ (Spielmann and Mey, 2005) are premature. As we have discussed throughout this book, games deliver information, content, narrative, spectacle, invitations and demands in multiple modes. The diversity of this address suggests that a variety of simultaneous ‘reading positions’ are open (or closed) to different players. As yet these offers and the manner in which they might mesh with different aspects of player subjectivity (in particular contexts) remain under-investigated.

While the ‘look’ of a body represented on screen can be analysed in terms of its face, physicality or wardrobe, the realisation of an avatar through play will involve a combining of its menu of movements, with the player’s operational skills and playing style. The input of players and their ability to determine the actions of an avatar (to some degree or other) means that while avatars are characterised, there are important differences between avatars and characters in films or novels. A trait expressed by the game, through dialogue, via gestures or actions, or by an avatar’s body, might become either emphasised or irrelevant - depending on the player's actions and priorities. While a partial account of an avatar's meaning is possible, the actualisation of the avatar and its traits will vary from player to player, and even session to session. A player might 'read' the avatar as an attractive, annoying or amusing character one moment, only to become absorbed manipulating it as a tool the next.

The ludic and the representational
Games involve rules. Players consent to work within these parameters, whereupon they are offered a set of variables, economies and components that are manipulated and reconfigured. We have used to term ‘ludic’ to cover these aspects of a game. The genres that we have been concerned with feature an emphasis on graphics and storytelling - they have locations and characters that are represented in compelling detail. We’ve referred to this material as the representational aspect of a game.

Together the ludic and the representational facets present a player with a set of offers, demands and invitations. These are selectively actualised through play. Each player is a culturally and socially situated subject who is manipulating a keyboard or a console control, interpreting menus and onscreen action, and participating in an experience within a particular context (say, a lounge room, as discussed in Chapter 9, on within an online, shared world, as is the case with Anarchy Online, discussed in Chapter 8). The game may overtly reference non-game texts (as with The Thing), or other, non-computer games (as with tabletop RPGs). Images or figures from within the game may re-appear in other contexts – whether it is in fan fiction, or on billboards advertisements. For these reasons, part of the meaning of a game resides in its relationship to wider cultural contexts.

Many avatars are simulations of people – and simulations are simplified models. Simplification involves leaving things out. The inclusions and exclusions built into a simulation might reflect cultural and social values (or biases, or assumptions), as well as game design decisions. Avatars in Baldur’s Gate, for instance, stagger if they are forced to carry too much; they need regular rest, or their performance will be impaired - but they do not need to eat, go to the toilet or shower. The rules of a computer games might express design choices that relate to gender and sexuality. The scores attributed to character strength in Baldur’s Gate, for example, are affected by species (elves are comparatively puny), but not by gender. Females are not programmed to be physically weaker than males. So it is possible for the player to assemble an all-male or all-female team, if they desire, without it impacting on game-play. In other games, avatars might feature different variables. In The Sims, for example, the characters’ affections are quantifiable. Sims can be gay or straight. They can live together as friends, as family, as lovers or as spouses. Sims are liable to be unfaithful if plied with gifts – but they are also programmed to become jealous, so romantic relationships involving more than two at a time are difficult to maintain.

As we noted in Chapter 1, a game can be defined as ‘a structured framework for spontaneous play’ (Pearce 2002: 113), and different games will allow for different degrees of scope in relation to these structures. As we described in Chapter 4, the player-generated Baldur’s Gate character of Bad Joan had wicked intentions, but her worst impulses were disallowed by the game’s rules. Thus the player might ignore traits attributed by the game to avatar, while traits attributed by the player to the avatar might be over-ruled by the game. In comparison to the player-generated protagonist in Baldur’s Gate, the identities of Cloud and the other characters in Final Fantasy VII (as discussed in chapters 6 and 7) are more deeply embedded in an extensive narrative. As
a result, characterisation and gender roles in the game are more determined. This, however, has not stopped fans from ‘re-working’ the characters’ gender, sexuality and relationships in their creative outpourings.

So, the meaning of gender in a game needs to be examined in terms of its rules, and in terms of representation. Yet meanings are also created through processes of use, interpretation and reception – which implies that the meaning of a particular representation could also be investigated as it emerges during play, at the hands of a socially and culturally situated user. Play involves repetition, ephemeral actions and improvised experimentation – and this variability will impact on any attempt to formulate a ‘once and for-all’ definitive account of the meaning of a gendered body onscreen.

The meaning attributed to an avatar by a player is likely to be provisional and shifting rather than static. Experienced gamers routinely distinguish between game-play and the representational ‘dressing’ or the trans-textual associations of a game. Newer or more casual users, in their turn, might accord a higher degree of importance to these factors. Neither position is ‘more correct’ – the point is that the meaning ascribed by a player to an aspect of the game is likely to change over time in response to the player’s own shifts in familiarity and competence. Furthermore, an avatar’s actions might alter to reflect the player’s increased skills, and its traits might vary from player to player according to their preferred gaming style (to become more aggressive, or more cautious, for example). For these reasons it is arguable that, in the end, the manner in which gender is inscribed in the game at a representational level might simply be over-ruled by the player. Consider again our experiences on Rubi-Ka, the world of Anarchy Online.

When we played this game we had the choice to play as male or female characters. From what we could ascertain, a cheerful mix of inhabitants populated the game-world (male and female, big and small, humanoid and more alien). It appeared to be (and we felt it to be) a diversely inhabited place. From our perspective the other avatars reflected the participation of both female and male players. A player, however, might ‘read’ all the female avatars as actually representing male players, in which case the visible diversity would be overturned by a homogenising interpretation. The male teenagers we interviewed were insistent that all the female avatars in this online game represented older, duplicitous male players (see Chapter 8). In actuality it is difficult to establish with any certainty the percentage of subscribers who are playing against their real-world gender. The game’s developers, Funcom, ‘does not have any statistics about the gender distribution of their players. They claim they have many female characters signed up, but they cannot know whether these female characters are representing male or female players’. (Gansmo, Nordli and Sorensen, 2003:15).

During a game the operational, ludic aspects of an avatar will intersect with issues relating to representation – and this is also true of the process of avatar design. For example, when describing the creation of an avatar named Jen for the action-adventure game Primal (released in 2003), the Lead Designer, Katie Lea, outlined a complex process that incorporated casting and working with actors (for motion capture, and for vocal recordings) as well as animation, 3D modelling and texturing, programming,
wardrobe and costume design, dialogue writing and back-story invention. Jen is a quirky, urban girl on a mission and her adventuring across dimensions is made possible by her ability to shift between demon forms. These demonic forms are based on elements – earth, air, fire and water, and each allows for a particular set of skills. As this indicates, her ‘look’, dialogue, demonic forms, gestures and gait, combat skills, controls and weapons are all integral to her character design. After the game’s European release, its characters were adapted for different international markets. The Japanese producers, for instance, were concerned that Jen’s demonic forms were unattractive, and that her hazel eyes, strong features and dark hair made her too ambiguous for the Japanese market. After discussing whether Jen should become either Japanese, or more emphatically Anglo-European, the Jen for Japan acquired

very blue eyes (and) a nose job - quite subtle changes really. Changes to the demon forms are more noticeable; they’re really toned down, quite pretty demons. Bizarrely she now has matching eye-shadow, depending on the demon form - so in [her earth demon] form she's wearing a glamorous green...(email, Katie Lea)

In contrast to Jen and other commercially produced avatars, there are the avatars generated by players within the open source movement. ‘Open source’ refers to game engines, programmes or coding accessible via the internet and open to reworking by computer literate users. There are, for instance, modding (from ‘modification’) communities who work with the Infinity Engine (Baldur’s Gate’s game engine), to create new quests, additional non-player characters, extra banter and dialogue and new relationships between team-mates (see www.gibberlings3.net, or www.blackwyrmrmail.net, for example). The open source movement is interesting in terms of games, gaming culture and gender, especially as it relates to online First Person Shooter (FPS) games like Quake. The avatars in these games were originally all male. This situation was remedied thanks to the direct intervention by players, who created and distributed female avatars through resources such as the Quake Women’s Forum at www.planetquake.com (for ‘women with attitude, and plenty of ammo’). Hacking, patching, modding and skinning practices resulted in ‘female heroines like the ‘Female Cyborg Patch’ and the ‘Tina-bob’ patch for Marathon (that) were among the first patches to offer active female avatars (in place of trophy princesses) for game play in shooters, prefiguring the official release of Tomb Raider’ (Schleiner 1999:4).

These practices indicate that the imposition of stereotypical attributes onto either players or game genres is problematic. Online FPS games are susceptible to gendered categorisation, because they involve macho, muscle bound, militaristic avatars with guns engaging in intense competition and fast-paced action. Yet this is less than half the story. As Schleiner (1999) has documented (see www.opensorcery.net) these games exist within a matrix of active, online communities, where creative innovation, mentoring and resource distribution are practiced, primarily - but not only - by male players. As such these FPS games and the communities in which they are situated manage to embody the traits most typically associated with ‘masculine’ gaming (guns, shooting, competition, pace) as well as those often attributed to the feminine
(collaboration, creativity, sociability). The point is not that particular genres or preferences are the proper domain of one gender, and not the other. The point is that attributing a certain playing style or gaming preference to one gender is simplistic. As FPS games and their collaborative communities indicate, questions of games and gender need to be considered in context. This involves looking at gaming culture, production and the industry.

**Gender, Games and Contexts**

No single factor can be held accountable for the apparent alienation of woman and girls from computer gaming. Nor is there a simple answer as to how this imbalance might best be addressed. As it currently stands the majority of computer games are produced by a primarily male industry that tends to assume a male audience. Computer games are publicised and reviewed in magazines that address a male (usually adolescent) reader, and they are often sold in retail outlets where men outnumber women on both sides of the counter. These factors in combination result in women and girls having less exposure to games, and less first hand experience of gaming. Girls and women who are unacquainted with games will have to answer researchers’ questions about their gaming preferences based on their impressions of games, rather than on actual experience. Girls and women who have not been introduced to the pleasures of gaming will not be motivated to buy or play games. This disengagement will ‘prove’ or perpetuate the notion that males are more inclined towards gaming. So fewer girls will be encouraged to take up gaming, and fewer girls than boys will grow up wanting to create or produce games – and the games industry will remain primarily male.

Different, cumulative historical and economic factors have contributed to the construction of maleness as the default gender for computer games and gamers. The gender bias has become ingrained in games production and reception. Over time it has become self-perpetuating and self-fulfilling, with the result that developers attempting to remedy this imbalance by deliberately targeting female consumers were often less than successful. As Laurel (1998) has pointed out, ‘whenever a ‘girl’ title was attempted, it was launched all alone onto the shelf without adequate marketing or retail support, and the inevitable failure easily became a proof that girls would not play computer games’.

It is quite common within game production to follow a design approach know as the ‘I methodology’ – a process in which ‘designers see themselves as typical users and use their own tastes and preferences as the basis of making design decisions’ (Gansmo, Nordli and Sorensen 2003:5). Consultants International Hobo conducted research into *Demographic Game Design*, and found that the industry tends to produce games that will appeal to the tastes of ‘the vast majority of game programmers’ (iHobo 2003:12). At the games company Funcom (the Norwegian developers of the online game *Anarchy Online*, discussed in Chapter 8) the employees are ‘90% men. The women work mainly within the administration’ (Gansmo, Nordli and Sorensen 2003: 16). Employment figures within the UK industry are not dissimilar. Approximately 16% of employees within the UK games industry are female, and ‘anecdotal evidence suggests that women are concentrated in marketing, PR and administration’ (Haines 2004: 3)³. Women are
employed to promote games - industry trade shows, for instance, hire female ‘booth
babes’ who are, according to one games correspondent, ‘lovely, captive women that
pretty much have to let you ogle them and take pictures’ (Dove, 2004).

Theorists, educators and designers who have investigated the alienation of women and
girls from player culture have often focused on questions of gaming preference. The
implication is that if games were produced in accordance with ‘female’ preferences, the
number of women or girls active in gaming culture would increase. The problem with
this approach is that it runs the risk of abstracting the problem (‘girls are not playing
games’) from its contexts – the cycle of production, marketing, consumption and
reception outlined above. Asking ‘what games do girls like?’ also implies that
preferences are determined by gender, but is it the case that gender is that aspect of
player identity most responsible for shaping tastes? What of age, class, peer groups,
cultural affiliations or sexuality? The fact is that our stated preferences will inevitably
reflect the experiences, the pleasures and the actual computer games to which we have
had access. Mapping patterns in preference is possible, but preferences are an
assemblage, made up of past positive experiences, and subject to situation and context.
The constituents of preference (such as access) are shaped by gender and, as a result,
gaming preferences may manifest along gendered lines. It is not difficult to generate
data that will indicate that gendered tastes exist, but it is short sighted to divorce such
preferences from the various practices that form them.

For these reasons theorists addressing questions of gender and preference have had to
tread carefully, researching and acknowledging the power of socialised patterns of play
on one hand, resisting essentialist notions of gender on the other (Cassell and Jenkins
2000). Gender is a demographic category, with measurable social, cultural, economic
and political repercussions for individuals – yet contemporary theory argues that gender
is fractious and multiple; that gender is continually negotiated and performed, that it is
provisional, rather than a fixed, attained condition (Butler 1990, de Castell and Bryson,
2000: 235). Gender ‘involves possibilities that are always in flux and that are determined
by many things’ (Cassell 2000:300). While theories of gender emphasise negotiation
and mutability, the way in which masculinity and femininity will manifest in day-to-day
life continues to impact on income, access and opportunity.

The literature on gender and games often underestimates the variety of computer
games available. Investigations into gaming preferences tend to establish separate
camps for male and female players, who are then depicted as possessing diametrically
opposite tastes. Males, for instance, are expected to 'gravitate to games that
incorporate scoring and fighting' (Gorritz and Medina, 2000: 44). Boys want fast paced,
skills based games ‘that involve substantial amounts of fighting and killing’ (Gorritz and
Medina 2000: 45) Games, as well as players, are classified: ‘boy-based games consist
of repetitive shooting, violent graphics, and loud noises…Girls tend to prefer games that
encourage collaboration with other players and involve storylines and character
development’ (Gurer and Camp 2002: 122). Researchers repeat that girls don’t want ‘to
outdo someone else’ (Gorritz and Medina 2000: 47). Girls reputedly possess ‘an
avowed dislike for aggression and [a] preference for cooperation over competition’
(Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 2000:55). These statements could be used to argue that RPGs are a female-friendly genre, but these accounts of gendered preference could be used to argue that RPGs do not appeal to male players at all – which is obviously not the case.

Furthermore, it has been noted that in interviews children (or adults for that matter) may answer questions with 'what they are supposed to say' (Cassell and Jenkins 2000:19), and the result is that they supply researchers with 'gender-appropriate' responses. Research shows that girls interviewed about computer games may be less than forthcoming about their level of experience. Pelletier (2005) for example, encountered 12 and 13 year old girls who, when interviewed in mixed company, would only admit to having played *The Sims*. Yet these same girls would later inadvertently demonstrate detailed knowledge of racing or fighting games.

These issues complicate the collection of data on gaming, gender and tastes. Game developers relying on 'empirical research as a justification for design and development decisions run the risk of reinforcing (and naturalizing) this gender-polarized play culture rather than offering an escape from its limitations on their choices' (Cassell and Jenkins 2000:20). Yet perhaps the need to have girls engaging with computers and technology is so pressing that appealing to gendered tastes is justified? Games for girls, or 'pink' games remain a controversial issue, but games tailored towards stereotypically masculine tastes are not subject to the same forms of interrogation, for several reasons. To begin with, computer games are very diverse, and the assumed male audience is not imagined to be a homogenous group and nor is this male audience generally referred to as a specialist market. Additionally, the under-representation of men in media, science or technology careers (on the basis of their gender) is not widespread. Finally, boys and men who are participating in online games culture, buying computer games or reading games magazines are not generally treated as interlopers, intruders or eccentrics.

The call for pink games has often been countered by reference to so-called 'grrl gamers' - girls and women who enthusiastically participate in apparently macho genres like online First Person Shooters (FPS). The grrl gamers interviewed in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* express dismay at the idea of pink games, arguing that such games perpetuate female meekness and marginalisation. Grrl Gamer Nikki Douglas, for example, has suggested that research indicating that girls shrink from competition or combat due to a preference for 'quiet contemplative games with well rounded characters and storylines' (Jenkins 2000: 335) merely demonstrates how effectively girls are conditioned to be passive. Douglas argues that the problem is not that boys are openly competitive; the problem is that girls are not and maybe, she adds, 'that’s why we are still underpaid, still struggling, still fighting for our rights.' (p 334). Of course to argue that all females should be satisfied with access to either 'girly' games or online FPS games would be to miss the point.

Research by AOL published in 2004 made apparent that women (at least in North America) are playing a great deal, but they are playing online puzzle and card games, rather than high profile console games. According to this research 'female game-players
over 40 spend the most hours per week playing online games (and these) women were also more likely to play online games every day than men or teens of either gender’ (AOL 2004). This could be a sign that these games offer something to these users that is more appealing than console titles. Others argue that women generally have less free time and less income than men – and this is going to inform leisure pursuits, including gaming habits. As Cardwell (2004) has pointed out, online puzzle games are easy to learn, yet impossible to master, and thus they appeal to people without the time to invest learning a complicated set of commands or travelling through a vast game-world. This is also the kind of game that is easily accessed and enjoyed while at work, although it would be difficult to establish just how many women (or men) are sitting at the keyboard during office hours playing puzzle or card games. It is also possible that part of the appeal of these games for women is that they do not entail venturing into territory that has been assertively designated male.

Sectors of the games industry have woken up to the fact that alienating half the population is commercially unwise, yet there is continued caution and conditionality about female participation. Retailers in general continue to make gender distinctions when selling games and games hardware, presumably in part because it compels parents to buy twice as much. The UK department store John Lewis, for instance, distributed a catalogue for Christmas 2003 titled ‘Top 5 Gifts For…’ in which they listed a Playstation 2 as a suitable gift for a boy. On the facing page a pink karaoke machine was touted as the equivalent present for a girl (and this kind of separatism must be difficult for the boy who wants the pink karaoke machine, as well as for girl who yearns for equal access to the console). When it comes to computer games, a great deal of money is spent making games for, and selling games to a male audience, and in all likelihood that is the main reason why there are more male players. Even when releasing an action-adventure version of a ‘girl friendly’ title like Buffy The Vampire Slayer, the developers focused on those aspects of the television programme that they believed were more likely to appeal to a male audience. The game ‘draws more on the action-adventure aspects of the show than the more ‘soap’ style interactions…For some potential players the generic alignment with fight-based action adventure, designed as it conventionally is to attract a male rather than female audience, may prove a step too far’ (Krzywinksa 2003:3)

A particular audience has been consistently sought and served by the games industry, and thus has expanded – while other sectors of the potential market have remained relatively untapped. In other words the association of masculinity with computer games is a construct, the result of a series of inventions, trends, practices and commercial decisions that have settled into a particular pattern. Fantasies and fears relating to new technologies are expressed most repetitively in the practices (such as games marketing) that proliferate between new technological devices and the contexts of their reception. Female marginalisation appears to be merely a side effect of an anxious drive to situate the male player as the ‘natural’ user of technology. There may be other explanations, but this is the simplest way to explain the level of nervous aggression aroused by the notion of women’s participation. Countless accounts of harassment and
gender policing are available on the internet. Here, as a representative example, is LegendaryMonkey's account of an online FPS gaming experience.

For those of you who don't know, *Halo 2* online is supported by the Xbox live voice chat -- so you can not only shoot and stab others, but talk shit over their corpses as well. Fun! When I started, I asked the husband how many girls he'd ever heard. I expected him to give it a moment's thought, y'know, to count. Not so; the answer was immediate: "None. Not one." Huh, thought I. No girls ever? I soon found out why. My third or fourth game in, I was greeted with, "Oh, look, there's a whore playing with us. Shut the hell up, whore, get back to your place" (memory may betray the exact wording, but it was close). What girl wants to face shit like that? None that I know. It's sad that the internet's anonymity fosters this sort of acting out, and while it affects everyone (the constant screams of "faggot" aren't great, either), it really works to create a hostile environment for girls.

(LegendaryMonkey at Suddenly Nothing, www.suddennothing.net

Laurel makes the point that in reaching out to female players, game developers or associated publications risk losing their existing male audience: ‘Even as late as 1994, major game companies steered clear of the potential girls market because they feared that being seen as doing things for girls would alienate their male audiences. By the way, our research showed that - initially at least - their fears were indeed well-founded’. (Laurel, 1998) This caution appears to be expressed in a special issue of *Edge*, a respected UK games magazine, titled ‘The Girl Issue’ (issue 121, March 2003) The magazine had good intentions, and yet mixed feelings about how to how to locate itself in relation to the question of sexism in games. On one hand, to quote from the Editorial: ‘As this themed issue should show, our concern is with the bigger picture: that the gaming community is and will continue to be worse off by ostracising girl gamers’ (Diniz-Sanches 2003:3). On the other hand, the magazine used a close-up of a digital girl’s bikini clad lap as its cover shot. According to the letters page of the following issue both male and female readers found the image embarrassing or ill judged. *Edge* responded that they were being ironic – a statement complicated by the erect nipples and bare thighs (female, in each instance) that graced the full-page advertisements paid for by games industry recruitment agencies in the same issue (see pages 116,117). While *Edge*’s gesture towards inclusion was cautious (it was a single, ‘special’ issue after all), it was still too much for some, as this (presumably male) reader’s letter indicates: ‘The fact is ladies, that you didn’t pay your dues. You can’t turn your nose up at a pastime, label it ‘sad’, then bitch about it twenty years later because it’s evolved into something you don’t like. You only get out what you put in, and with some very honourable exceptions, women have given us jack, bar some rather delightful inspiration…’ (Letter R.Casewell, *Edge* issue 122 p.127)

The publishers of *Edge* at the time, Future Publishing, hedged their bets by releasing a special issue dedicated to sex and sub-titled ‘Games, Girls, Guns, Gyrating, G-strings’ two months later on another of their titles, *Playstation 2*. The issue included an article on women avatars titled ‘Who's The Sexiest’ – with a follow up feature where various
female characters where rated as either ‘Swingers or Mingers’ (minger is UK slang for ugly). Throughout the magazine the reader is addressed as male and heterosexual, and the assumption is that only female avatars can be sexually attractive. Yet anecdotal evidence, audience research (Carr 2005), and common sense would suggest that male and female players have noticed the relative attractiveness of various male avatars. In material produced within Japanese fan cultures (as discussed in Chapter 7) the sexual appeal of male avatars is openly celebrated.

Research we have recently undertaken at a South London girls school found signs that (for some, at least) the links between computer games and masculinity is becoming less pronounced than prior research has documented (Carr 2005). For these 12 and 13 year-old girls computer games were a regular feature of their social and family lives. They were all casual rather than hard-core gamers in that none of them played for hours on a daily basis, and they tended to borrow, share or rent games rather than make regular purchases, which also means that they would not be visible as consumers (Kerr 2003:282, 284, Bryce and Rutter: 2002). Their gaming did not set them apart from their peers. On the contrary most talked to their friends about games. In interviews and conversations the girls would refer to playing with their older cousins, sister or especially their dad as a regular and enjoyable yet otherwise unremarkable part of their younger childhood.

So there may be signs that things are changing. Fantasies of natural female disinterest and associated practices of female disenfranchisement might become increasingly obsolete, yet it is only to be expected that social and cultural factors will continue to impact on users according to their gender (as well as their age, income, class, ethnicity, etc.). When new leisure technologies arrive in homes the terms of their use are negotiated through existing patterns of gender and power, as Gray’s study of women and VCRs demonstrated (Gray, 1992), and this applies to computer games too (Schott and Horrell, 2000). Girls and boys might well be socialised to engage in different forms of play (Laurel 1999), and there is a long, well-documented tradition of male gaming and game-related socialising that alienates women, and which certainly predates computer games (for an exploration of this see Fine’s study of Role Playing Gamers in the Mid Western US in the late 70’s, Shared Fantasy (Fine, 1983) as well as Bryce and Rutter’s (2002, 2003) work on LAN parties and the competitive games scene in the UK).

**Conclusion**

It might be the case that more girls and women are playing, and that games production and marketing forces are gradually broadening their focus to include female consumers, yet any such progress may not be the result of timely intervention by academics, educators or progressive developers. It could be that it is becoming less necessary to fantasise that women and girls are inherently disinclined towards gaming, because computer gaming itself has grown in the popular imagination to the point where it can accommodate differently zoned, and differently defined, spaces – and this expansion creates room for diversification.
Over recent years computer games in general have shifted out of the cultish margins and into the mainstream of popular culture. This could be the result of many different factors, but the phenomena that might be most responsible is the success of cross-media licences and faddish collectables - from *Pokemon* and *Tamagotchi*, to the games based on highly popular, pervasive franchises including *The Matrix* films and game, the *Harry Potter* series (books, games and films) or the recent *Lord of the Rings* related products (books, films, computer games and board game).

In the wake of computer games’ movement into mainstream popular culture, older distinctions between people who play (male) and people who don’t (female) might become outdated or discarded - or perhaps they will merely be re-worked. At the time of writing another distinction appears to be emerging to take its place: the categories of the hard-core gamer, and casual gamer. Hard-core or ‘committed gamers’ are those who play for hours a day ‘and who buy games on a weekly/fortnightly basis’ (Kerr 2003: 278), and they are generally identified as male (or renegade female), while the casual or social player is less definitely gendered. A parallel division is made between ‘real games’ and various, playful alternatives (culprits would include *SingStar*, *Dance Dance Revolution* and *Samba de Amigo*). It is not clear which market is regarded as the more lucrative by the industry. Kerr (2003:278) found that Sony, for example, ‘admitted that they were only really interested in hard-core gamers’. On the other hand, Gansmo, Nordli and Sorensen (2003:5) found that the industry professionals they interviewed identified two kinds of male gamer: ‘the hard-core gamers who play a lot, but who were not considered very interesting as a market because they tend to buy few games [and a second more interesting group] described as the casual gamers…boys and men who play now and then.’

From the perspective of game studies and game culture analysis, it might become increasingly important to distinguish between serious gamers and casual players, as these groups are likely to look to games for different pleasures, express different preferences, and engage in gaming in distinct ways. It does not follow that either group’s engagement with computer games would be more meaningful, significant or credible - or that one group would be the more legitimate to study than the other.

Emerging distinctions between hard-core and casual gamers might shift the focus from gender at an explicit level, but as fewer women have the time or income to devote gaming on anything more than a casual basis, the division is likely to reflect a gender divide. As this implies, the disenfranchisement of women and girl players from computer games and gaming cultures cannot be addressed by a single solution or a straightforward equation. The notion that more female avatars or more ‘female’ games will lead to more female players, and that more female players will result in more women entering the games industry, might not prove correct – not least because other factors including race, age and class will continue to intersect with gender, determining access to education and technologies – and, in turn, impacting on the numbers of women entering into technology based careers or the games industry.
The increased variety and availability of female avatars is certainly welcomed, but establishing the meaning of a gendered and played body onscreen is a complex task. The manner in which an avatar (of whatever gender) is constituted within a game (by its rules and its representational aspects) can be analysed - with the proviso that these factors might not manifest in a particular or predictable manner during actual play. The meaning of a game, or the portrayal of gender within a game, can be investigated as it emerges during play within a particular context, at the hands of a particular user – with the proviso that this interpretation is not assumed to be universal. Finally, a game’s relationship to wider culture is also part of what ‘it means’ – and this too can be analysed. The game may foreground its links to a particular film or book, or a popular sport, or it might incorporate certain gender or racial clichés, and as such a game might be collaborating in the perpetration of particular norms or values within wider culture. Whether any such values or patterns survive the unpredictable, variable and ephemeral nature of play, would be another question.

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**NOTES**

1 Interview with author, April 2003.
2 See Kennedy H. (2005) for more on women Quake players.
3 Of course the computer games industry is hardly alone in having a 'gender gap'.
There are male dissidents within the industry. In one incident a programmer working on a helicopter simulation game managed to replace the ‘token female bimbos in bikinis with boy bimbos in bikinis’ (Schleiner 1999:5). Unfortunately bikini boys began to appear more often than anticipated which led to the programmer losing his job.

This might not be choice of course. At least one of the players wanted considerably more access than she was able to secure.