

Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus, Video Games Are From...?

After being alive for 20 years, I feel that I can safely say that men and women are different. The differences are more apparent on some days than others. However, the interesting question is to what extent we are actually different—anatomical differences aside. It's these potential differences that can answer one of the most frequently asked questions about video games. Where are all the female gamers? The industry, in its entirety, is in an unbalanced situation. There must be some reason, or reasons, as to why, and one should look to psychological perspectives in trying to figure out the problem, taking into account environmental, cognitive, and possibly even genetic factors.

In order to even attempt to start at getting to some kind of a solution, the problem must clearly be defined. According to a 2009 study, 40% of the gaming population is female (ESA). This sounds like wonderful, happy news, and some would figure that because of this there isn't a problem. This is merely just a surface-level number, which includes the casual games market. Casual gaming is an entirely different branch of gaming than the more hardcore type of games that receive the majority of the industry's and news media's attention. Many studies have concluded that there is a very large population of women over the ages of 30 and 40 playing casual games. These studies even go so far as to say that they play more frequently and spend more time playing than other demographics (Vargas). It is clear that there *are* women playing video games. However, this information, though pleasant as it is, does not actually dissolve the issue at hand.

Taking the time to look more closely at specific stats helps to make the problem very clear. The imbalanced distribution of female games is made much more apparent when looking strictly at the populations for the current generation of consoles, which includes the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Wii. The population boasts an enormous 45 million people, but of those, only 11.7 million of those are female; for those without the desire to break out a calculator, that's only 26% (Totilo). That's significantly lower than the grand 40% boasted by the ESA's stats from the same year. As discomfoting

as 26% sounds, it actually does get slightly worse. When looking even further at strictly the female population in terms of individual consoles, it is revealed that 80% of them were owners of Wiis, a console with a well-known reputation for mostly casual gaming. 11% owned Xbox 360's, and 9% owned PlayStation 3's, which together make up only 20% (Totilo). This is not a statement about sales—for the purposes of this paper anyway; it's a statement about where the female gamers are. Once the problem fully is established, things then become a question of where the female gamers *aren't* and why.

The environment of women today may very well be a factor in the slim number of lady gamers. Many little girls start out watching over their brothers' or fathers' shoulders. They get curious, but within their friend groups at school, it may not be normal for one of their own to play video games. It may even be that a girl's own family is the one pressuring her to stay away from games, believing they are for the male members of the family only. Being raised in this kind of environment would certainly ingrain the message that females are not welcome to even play video games, much less become a part of the community.

The gaming community is one that does outwardly express how welcome women are to play video games. The way it's expressed, however, ends up feeling more like a government-sponsored PSA, because the reality is that the attitudes amongst individuals are still focused on the idea that women don't—don't, not can't—play games. This is clear by the way the industry is represented in stereotypical media outlets. Images of raucous teenage boys playing FPS's or heavy-set loners bedded down in their computer caves still plague this industry. Because of the impact that media has on people, it does have an effect on the industry.

The environment of the industry itself is one that definitely lacks a woman's touch. In 2008, only 12% of the industry was female (West). In many of the game design and programming degrees available in colleges, less than 5% of the students are female (Slagle). The reasons why there aren't as many women in the industry merits an entire paper of its own and isn't the intent of this one. However, it

serves as a demonstration of the game industry environment. Being so outnumbered, it's easy for a woman to feel intimidated or even unwelcome. More than 60% of female students enrolled in these programs said that kind of intimidation was a deterrent for women looking for careers (West). This imbalance, while serving as a cause of social aversion to becoming a part of the industry, may also be part of the problem at the consumer level. If there's only one gender making video games, then it's going to be difficult for the games to appeal equally to both genders.

The very genetic makeup of women may very well be another cause of why their interest in games may seem so limited. Women, as certain studies have shown, are much more capable of multitasking. Not only is there the capability, but women also seem to enjoy doing it as well. Based on a notion brought forth by Ian Bogost, this fact actually plays a role in the way women play video games. There are some women who view games, chiefly casual games, as a sort of side activity to do while doing something else, such as talking on the phone (Harrison). Looking at things from a more design-centric approach, one can see the way that one-task games such as first person shooters, with only one objective—killing, can fail to keep women engaged. Certain casual games, like *Diner Dash* and *The Sims*, real-time strategy games, like *Age of Mythology*, and role-playing games, like *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, are designed with multitasking as a part of their game structure. These are all games that have a fairly large female audience, and the fact that their designs adhere to a woman's inherent abilities may in fact be part of the reason for their successes.

Taking a look at a more cognitive approach, the ideas that women have about games are ones that are generally optimistic but somewhat discouraged by what they currently see (Tierney). There are these ideas of what constitutes a certain kind of person, like a hero type character. A compelling but realistic character that can be readily identified with is ideally what can make or break a story. Additionally, such characters are what the majority of women look for when engaged in a gaming experience (Schell). Unfortunately, this is what games within the more hardcore realm severely lack. The

lack of female characters is evident in a recent poll of the top ten game characters of *Game Informer*. Of them, there was only one character that was female (GI). Characters of both genders in the majority of games are unrealistic, but it seems that the female characters—the few that exist—are the ones that get hypersexualized, given traits that specifically exude overly provocative femininity. Meanwhile, the male characters are very masculine but do not possess a sexual quality (Girard). It's the difference between the ideas of the game industry and the ideas of the female population about what it is to be a heroine that cause issues.

Interestingly enough, this aversion to playing a hypersexualized character of the same sex was found to apply to both genders. Senior game designer for Sony, Sheri Ray, is the author of Gender Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market, and it was during her presentation at the Sex and Video Games Conference that this fact became evident. She showed the audience, the majority of which was male, a slide consisting of “highly sexualized and anatomically perfect...models.” She then asked who among the audience would be willing to play a game with one of those characters. Only a few females raised their hands (Girard). From this demonstration, it is clear that while an unrealistically attractive character may be alluring to the a few members of the opposite sex, using these images as game character ultimately detracts from the games' full potential for bringing in gamers, regardless of gender.

Having looked at all these aspects of women's expectations and what the hardcore game scene currently has to offer, one can clearly see all of the underlying issues that come together to create this problem. The solution to something like this isn't going to be something obvious or simple. One has to look at the industry and women and wonder what needs changing, the games or the people. Perhaps there can be some kind of middle ground. Network engineer of Red Storm Entertainment Judy Tyrer believes that the game industry should stop trying to cater to one gender or the other and simply focus on general interests of people, since both men and women do actually share a lot of interests (Haskins). This is not an unreasonable approach to looking at game design. Playing the gender card when it comes

to design has brought us to this place, and maybe throwing away these ideas could bring everyone together. Throwing everything away in favor of something new is not an overnight chore, but it's not an impossible one either.

Having analyzed this issue through its various psychological elements, it turns out that what was an issue of gender differences now becomes an issue of gender similarities. When the industry starts to make a conscious effort in finding a common ground between the two sexes' preferences, the industry can then move forward. From that, an entirely new demographic of people can be included in the excitement of this entertainment form, which will lead to greater interest in careers for this industry. More diversity in the workplace will inevitably lead to more diversity of games. Before we get to hold hands and sing about rainbows however, the people of this industry have got to get the ball rolling and make the effort.

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