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Women and Gaming Culture: A Pilot Study on the Experience of Feminine Individuals

Entering the Video Game Community

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¹ The original research proposal for this study was written in 2018 by Max Townsend and Molly Engelberg.

Abstract

This paper inquires about the communication experience of feminine individuals entering the gaming culture. Many think of video games as a brand new medium, free from the old biases and masculine dominant ideologies of yesteryear, but that would be a false assumption. In this study, an online survey was digitally distributed and 100 feminine individuals responded. Respondents answered five open-ended qualitative questions about their impressions of the video game community and how it could be altered to better suit their needs.

Introduction

When you first boot up a video game the characters you are greeted with are usually very predictable. Muscle bound hyper masculine male protagonists make up a majority of the playable characters in games and when we get the occasional female character they, more often than not, are hyper-sexualized and hyper-feminine. When feminine individuals go to play these games, the male bias is very noticeable and often offputting to female gamers, naturally pushing them out of the gaming community. In this paper, the term “video game community” will be used to refer to the relationship between game designers and the players who are participating and exploring the game they have created, as well as relationships between players of multiplayer online games, competitive esports, and gaming fans. In the 80s, gaming communities were formed among the relationships between children, teens and adults meeting up at an arcade and playing games together. Now, there are international conventions, active online message boards, and digital relationships that form through gaming in addition to in-person arcade relationships. All of these are facets of the umbrella term “gaming community”.

Analyzing the gaming community starts by looking at who is creating these characters and shaping the values in games. In an already male-dominated tech world, the game industry has an even more prevalent male presence. With a workforce consisting of an 85-90% male demographic (Johnson, 2014), men are typically the ones designing these characters, as well as driving the underlying production and direction of these games. Without female influence, male biases and values are (even unintentionally) placed into these designs. The result we get is a tilted misrepresentation of females at a fundamental level in building these games, resulting in more male appeal and a larger male demographic. This results in more male awareness of the games industry and more men wanting to work in it. This is a circular system that creates a cycle of male values that are feeding into one another, perpetuating an overtly masculine climate. In this paper, when the researcher refers to “the cycle,” that is referencing this perpetuated exclusion of less women and feminine individuals making games, therefore less women and feminine individuals play games, which leads to less women and individuals becoming inspired to make games, and so on. Given the gender misrepresentation in video games this pilot study is exploring the following questions: What is the experience of women and feminine individuals entering the gaming community? And if it is negative, how do we break the cycle?

Literature Review

To understand the relationship between gender and video games, it is important to analyze the power structures in the tech industry and draw correlations to the effect it has on the gaming community specifically. In 2015, women held 57% of all bachelor's degrees (Catalyst, 2018). Yet, they represented only 38% of non-technical roles, 20% of leadership roles, and 36%

of highly technical roles in the tech industry (Scott, 2018). 14% of women who complete STEM degrees do not end up joining the labor force due to hiring obstacles (Dresden, 2018).

The content in games is directly impacted by developers and when we are analyzing gender in gaming it is important to take a look at the demographics of those on the development side as well as on the consumer level. The binary gender split of people who play video games is 45% women and 55% men (U.S. Video Gamer Gender Statistics, 2018). But on the other side of the screen, the International Game Developers Association's 2017 Satisfaction Survey revealed that only 21% of the game developers they interviewed identified as female (IGDA, 2018).

Once women do make it into these positions, they are likely to face other obstacles. These include, but are not limited to, stereotyping (office mother/housekeeper), social alienation, less mentoring opportunities, and sexual harassment (Daley, 2018). 85% of women in the United States have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, and an overwhelming majority of these cases go unreported. Studies show that women in male-dominated work environments are 17% more likely to report sexual assault as an issue than women in equal/women-dominated work environments (McLaughlin, 2017). There is an 8% increase between these two groups of women who say they have experienced sexual assault at work (Pew Research Center, 2018). In order to survive in male-dominated fields, it has been observed that women gravitate toward 3 major coping mechanisms: isolating themselves in the workplace (especially from other women), acting like "one of the boys", or leaving the tech industry (Sarathchandra, 2018). There are no statistics available on non-binary feminine people's experiences in these fields, but they are likely to be similar, if they present similarly.

Last but not least is the ever-present obstacle of the “wage gap”. A majority of the best-paying industries are male-dominated fields, yet, based on median weekly earnings, women made less than men in equivalent roles in every male-dominated industry in 2017 (Holtzman, 2019). Some fields did not even have enough women in the labor force to be able to compare salaries (Martin, 2018). The distinct inequalities in this industry translate from off screen development to on the screen as well.

Inclusivity towards feminine people in the video game community started in the 1980’s. *Pac-Man* is often cited as an early example of a video game catered toward a gender neutral audience. The 1980 arcade hit was created by Toru Iwatani, who has said that he created the game specifically with the goal in mind of attracting a female audience to arcade games. This was during the peak of space invaders and war games, and Iwatani wanted to create a gender neutral game that consumers of all ages could enjoy (Pursell, 2015). Despite this, the main character of *Pac-Man* is still male, showing an even more transparent lack of understanding of the female clientele. The male perspective was still the default, despite designing a game with the intent of being accessible to women. Nevertheless, it was the most attractive option available to potential female gamers at the time, and *Pac-Man* was a success. In the U.S., *Pac-Man* made over a billion dollars in quarters in its first year (Jones, 2013). The diverse fan base continued to grow with the release of the sequel, *Ms. Pac Man*, which is now famously the first game ever released that has an equal ratio of female and male characters. But again, *Ms. Pac Man* is just a copy of her male counterpart, with a bow and some lipstick thrown on top, which doesn’t necessarily make her the ideal feminist icon. *Pac-Man* and its sequels did the absolute bare

minimum to appeal to women, but this didn't slow it down, in fact this lazy attempt at diversity made it the biggest hit of its time.

1996's *Tomb Raider* featured a female protagonist named Lara Croft with a character design that is entirely built around sex appeal. When modifying Lara's character model, a character designer accidentally increased her breast size by 150% (McLaughlin, 2008). The design team (made up entirely by men) loved it and decided to keep these changes. *Tomb Raider* set itself apart from other games of its time by using a female protagonist that wasn't a damsel in distress, but at the same time it kicked off a design philosophy of hypersexualising female characters to increase sales that persists to this day. Unfortunately this design philosophy was heavily rewarded as *Tomb Raider* became one of the top selling video games of that year, kicking off not only a full on franchise complete with multiple movies, but Lara Croft's sex appeal earned the publishers over at Eidos Interactive a flood of product endorsement offers. This included everything from energy drinks to sports cars, even appearing on a massive screen in U2's PopMart tour in 1998 (McLaughlin 2008). With Lara Croft being the only character built around sex appeal in a market dominated by heterosexual adolescent males, featuring character designs like this was lucrative for the creators. In a time where video game box art featured fat Italian plumbers and cartoon animals, it is no wonder this sold so many copies. Some argued that although the character design was objectifying, it was still a small victory for feminine individuals, since the community finally got a female protagonist in a mainstream action game. But these designs are not a thing of the past, we can find this still very prevalent in contemporary games.

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain (2015) features the character Quiet. Quiet is a super soldier sniper that can accompany the protagonist on missions, and plays a minor part in the overall story. She never speaks, and her outfit comprises a utility belt, torn up leggings, and a bikini that covers the bare minimum. The explanation for all this skin is that she needs to breathe through her skin for her powers to work. Then, the designers went on to depict her in hypersexualized situations like splashing around in a shower for the player to sit and ogle at, or rolling around in puddles striking compromising poses, or standing in a helicopter in cutscenes bending over and providing the player with ample time to take it all in. This character explicitly caters to the male gaze from the perspective of the protagonist. With each of these examples there has been massive amounts of backlash from female gamers and feminists alike, yet we see these values persists for decades in spite of ongoing criticism and public outcry. This industry needs to listen to its consumers and work to make feminine individuals feel included in this community. According to a recent report by Newzoo (the leading games marketing analytics company) the video game market will account for \$137.9 Billion (Widjman, 2018). This market is expected to grow to \$180.1 billion dollars by 2021 (Widjman, 2018).

Metal Gear Solid V's success was especially shocking as its release was timed with the major historical event in the video game industry and video game community: Gamergate. Gamergate all began with a successful 2013 game release by female designer Zoe Quinn. After the game took off, Quinn's ex-boyfriend wrote a shockingly intimate series of blog posts, in which he claimed she cheated on him with many men in the game industry, and that is what led to her success (Dewey, 2019). Quinn, as well as the men he named in the article, all denied these allegations, but the sex life of this young independent gamer had already made headlines at that

point. Quinn was heavily cyberbullied and received incredibly specific and actionable death and rape threats. She eventually was forced to flee her home and call the police. This band of angry, anonymous gamer bullies then went on to attack important gaming figures who were defending Quinn: Anita Sarkeesian, feminist writer and game critic, Jenn Frank, gaming journalist, and Mattie Brice, game designer. Sarkeesian was forced to leave her home, like Quinn. Frank and Brice also received so much harassment that they quit their jobs in the game industry. This massive media-scandal-turned-gender-war goes down in history as affirming the discomfort the gaming community feels about the growing presence of feminine people in the industry.

With this industry becoming so controversial, it is shocking to see there is a lack of scholarly work being conducted surrounding the field. Only two key papers have been written in the last few years and have continued the conversation beyond Gamergate. The 2016 paper by Teresa Lynch and her associates titled *Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years* analyzed female characters in video games. They examined in-game content (specifically sexualization of the various characters) of several games released between 1983 and 2014. The researchers found that the games marketed towards men had more sexualized characters than games marketed toward a gender neutral audience (e.g. role playing games). While games rated Everyone featured distinctly less sexualization, games rated Teen and Mature did not differ in sexualization. Sexualization increased between the 1980s and 1990s, but has been diminishing ever since. While the amount of playable female characters has steadily increased since the 1980s, they are still mostly represented as sexualized and play only secondary roles in the 2010s. The more hypersexualized a female character was, the higher

their physical capabilities were. Yet, after all this, the researchers determined no correlation between sexualization and the success of a game.

The second notable paper, *Hiding in Plain Sight: Reproducing Masculine Culture at a Video Game Studio* by Robin Johnson provides an inside look into how game studios treat women. With the understanding that there are more men working on the creation of games than women due to external education factors, Johnson studied how the workplace environment at video game companies plays into maintaining the cycle. Her findings noted that most of the men were not inherently sexist, but when artists and programmers were collaborating on creating characters, masculinity was being communicated between the two parties and that is when feminine portrayals begin getting blown out of proportion.

Beyond these two studies, most of the demographic research on how to attract feminine individuals to games is kept privately within game companies trying to use such information for their own gain, and is not shared with social scientists for academic research. In addition, while there is some research being conducted on game content by these companies, almost no one is investigating the community and culture surrounding games.

Methodology

To collect relevant data, the researcher interviewed feminine individuals via online survey. The survey consisted of long-form open-ended qualitative questions were asked about their perception of femininity (or lack thereof) in games and the gaming community, prefaced by a few brief demographic questions. The demographic questions had respondents list their gender identity, occupation, and age. This study has been carefully engineered to be gender inclusive

and acknowledges that gender is not a binary. While men were not included in the sampling process, individuals that identified as either women or non-binary (that presented in a feminine way) were encouraged to participate. The survey was distributed via a Facebook group that has a membership comprised of women and feminine non-binary people of all ages. Occupational data was collected to be able to gauge how much free time and money these individuals have to spend on video games, and to see which respondents worked as game designers and which did not. Ages were collected to see which age groups had the strongest connections to gaming, and responses were sorted by age while being cross-referenced.

The second half of the survey comprised five open-ended questions, as follows:

1. What has your experience been like with video games?
2. Do you find the gaming community welcoming to women and feminine individuals? Why or why not?
3. How do you think women are portrayed in video games?
4. What would you change about video games to make them more appealing to a feminine audience?
5. What would you change about the gaming community to make it more appealing to women and feminine individuals?

These questions were designed to be gender inclusive, open-ended, and thought-provoking. The first question is to determine the kind of communities these feminine individuals are participating in, and if these experiences have been positive or negative. The second and third questions are to gather impressions of the community as it is, whether it be a distant impression or an up close and personal one. It is important to include those who are

distant from the community, because if their impression is negative, and that is what is keeping them away, that is something we need to know. The final two questions were added to gear the responses toward future solutions. The goal of this study is to derive solutions to the problem, so no better to hear from than those who are directly affected by the situation.

Data Collection

Respondents to the survey are both feminine individuals who have entered gaming culture and stayed with it, and feminine individuals who have left or never entered the community. The respondents were employed in a variety of occupations, both in and out of the gaming industry, and all ages were welcomed. A sample size of 100 participants was chosen, because there needed to be enough content and variety to tie a correlation across all the experiences and find a common theme, but few enough responses that the researchers could read all of them in a reasonable amount of time. All responses are anonymous and quotes pulled from the responses are labelled according to the respondent's gender identity, occupation, and age. No respondent gave exactly the same information as another, but the structure of the form was consistent across them all, making the variety of responses reliable. This pilot study structure begins looking for answers to our research question by telling us what the experience is like for feminine individuals entering gaming culture, and gave insight on how to resolve discrimination.

Data Analysis

The online form had 100 respondents, ranging from ages 17 to 72. 93% of respondents identified as women, 6% identified as non-binary, and 1% identified as demifemale.

“What has your experience been like with video games?”

Almost all respondents had some relationship with video games, either positive or negative. Only 9 out of the 100 respondents had no relationship to video games. 5 out of those 9 respondents were over 60 years old. Of the 93 respondents who did have relationships with video games, all of them had at least some games they liked and frequented that had positive impacts on their life. As one female 21 year old game design student responded, “There are so many types of games and I really think there's a game out there for just about anyone!” Another positive response by a female 28 year old copywriter said: “Video games taught me how to read, engage, problem-solve, and get more comfortable with failure. I accredit video games with developing my love for engaging in stories and viewing myself as the protagonist of my own story.” The following response from a 30 year old disabled female referenced enjoying the personal aspects versus social aspects: “Video games, as a solitary hobby, have been incredibly entertaining, memorable and influential. Becoming immersed in a world and story has always been exciting, and even more so when I can be intimately involved in it. The games in which I have played with others was used as a way to connect with my loved ones.”

Some of those who have a consistent relationship with one or two video games that they prefer, these respondents seemed to feel self-conscious that the games they were playing were not “real games”. Over 20% of responses gave disclaimers about the genre of games they preferred, such as “cute” Nintendo games, creative sandbox games, or puzzle campaign games. A great example of this was a brief response from a 39 year old female mom: “I like non violent cartoon-y games like the Super Mario games.” A female student, age 21, specifically went on to say “I’ve always seen a clear divide in the types of video games that are clearly for girls and

others specifically for boys. Because of this I've also felt self conscious buying certain games because I didn't feel like they were made for me or I would be judged playing them."

"Do you find the gaming community welcoming to women and feminine individuals?"

While almost every respondent had a positive relationship to video games themselves, the impression of inclusivity in the community was consistently negative. Of the 93 respondents that had relationships with video games, all 93 of them said they did not find the community welcoming, whether it was just a distant impression or they had specific negative experiences. Most responses were along the lines of this one, by a 25 year old account executive: "Definitely not. Often times I get discredited for attention-seeking or if I'm playing competitively and win, then it was a fluke. It seems like feminine individuals are not intended to succeed in any gamer industry." A 26 year old therapist elaborated: "The things that frustrate me mirror what frustrates me in a non virtual world. Such as making women look like they need to be sexy. Not providing accessible outlets for those who need it, or the ability to feel proud of being good at a game." To avoid harassment, a female 40 year old insurance worker said "I will often login with masculine names to avoid the drama."

"What do you think about the way women are portrayed in video games?"

Out of all responses, only 3 did not have negative things to say about feminine portrayal in games. One said that sex sells, so it does not bother them much. Another appreciated that female characters are usually very athletic and tough. The third said that men are being oversexualized just as much lately, so the hypersexualization of female characters does not feel out of place anymore.

The other 97 responses were not nearly as forgiving. The standout word across all the responses was “sexual”--oversexualized, hypersexualized, sexy, etc. Everyone seemed to appreciate the feminine badassery aspects of female characters lately, but also did not care to have only such incredibly sexualized role models to compare themselves to. A retired woman, age 55, explained her experience over her many years in the community, saying “It’s better now than it was but really couldn’t have gotten worse. From chainmail bikinis to an over-reliance on gore and violence, they’ve excluded women from being seen as the range of potential. Yes, there are some female characters who are strong and powerful today, but most of them are also evil, naked, or both.” One non-binary instructional designer, age 27, put simply: “Boob cups in armor must die.”

“What would you change about video games to make them more appealing to a feminine audience?”

Most responses were focused on the appearance of female characters -- more realistic body types, less value placed on their attractiveness, more diversity, more functional armor. Other suggestions beyond appearance involved bigger story arcs for female characters, having just as many female characters as male characters present, more female main characters without a backstory that explains why they are tough (single father, raised with brothers, etc. -- just a main character that happens to be female and happens to be the main character), more intelligent female characters, and eliminating misogynistic undertones in the community. Further specific ideas included: “The platforms in which the gaming community advertises new releases is a big one.” - Female student, age 20. “I would like it if women’s characters were written with the same amount of respect that men have.” - Female student, age 18. “Let [characters] be LGBTQ, Black,

Latino, Asian, curvy, chubby, or anything in between. Let them have flaws and real character issues.” - Female student, age 19.

“What would you change about the gaming community to make it more appealing to women and feminine individuals?”

All responses involved inclusivity and respect. Respect for female gamers and spotlighting them more, as well as eliminating the “gamer girl” tropes and making the community more gender neutral overall. Encouraging kinder language toward feminine people in communities, and banning/more impactful repercussions for the less kind language. Finally, several responses had an emphasis on wanting to feel heard. A 30 year old demifemale homemaker said “Take our grievances, opinions, and requests seriously. Be it taking harassment seriously, or taking requests to change plot tropes and/or female-body models seriously. Take the femm community's opinions and requests seriously and do something to change it.” Another 30 year old said: “I think leading change by example speaks volumes. Every time a gal subverts shitty expectations, she makes a wake for other femmes to show up, to screw up, and to fail without feeling like it defines her. What I would change comes down to choices, and I choose to take up space that goes beyond an us vs. them gendered play space. I've played video games for 20 years. I'm not going to let anyone shame me out of playing anything.”

Discussion

The previous data can not be generalized as representative of the entire female and feminine population, as this is simply a pilot study to test the survey methods. A future study based off of this one would ideally have careful large-scale sampling techniques and inferential

statistics. But this preliminary research study affirms the researchers' theory that it is the people creating and playing games that are ostracizing feminine individuals. The fact that they are video games is not what drives feminine people away, as these respondents clearly expressed strong attachment to video games in response to the first question. It is the way these games are created, a way that is not intended for female consumers to succeed, that is driving feminine individuals away. Beyond that, the way the more violent video games are marketed, those seem to have weight as more "real" video games, and if you play video games (that still count as video games) there is a pressure to elaborate that you do not play the violent ones. This leads to most feminine individuals being ostracized from the community for not being "real gamers", because they are not playing "real games." Game design companies need to both hear the voices of their female designers and their female consumers, or else soon, they will be out of business as the industry keeps progressing and they do not adapt.

With feminine people being shut out of a massive multi-billion dollar industry like gaming, there is a distinct lack of voices being heard. If the cycle continues to perpetuate itself we are not only going to see poor representations of women and feminine individuals continue to plague this industry, but we are going to see the values perpetuated by this seep into the psyche of gamers in our society. By conducting more studies like this one, the gaming community and industry will benefit as well as women and feminine individuals involved in these communities. Game development companies should take away from these studies that they are not successfully giving their female audience a safe space, and listen to this audience regarding how to change their business practices to remedy the situation. Many respondents went on to reach out to the researcher after the study, thanking them for conducting this survey. Even knowing that it was a

pilot study and these results may not go beyond the university, these feminine individuals were just grateful for an opportunity to air their grievances, since no one else is asking them to. Developers should also encourage more research to be conducted in this area as a whole to keep up with the rapid progression of this industry. Future research should also be done into how these hyper-masculine and male-centric values affect male gamers as well.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to gain insight into the experience of women and feminine individuals entering the gaming community. In a medium that is mostly male dominated it is important to see what makes it so skewed and to get input from the female demographic to make video games and gaming culture more inclusive and approachable for people of all walks of life. Women have been misrepresented in gaming for far too long and the male dominance of this community is visible and prevalent on every level. This pilot study is an important first step in gathering data on the personal experiences of feminine individuals in this community and more research might clarify how gaming can be improved for everyone. When studies like this are neglected, this cycle continues to perpetuate. Every community needs a study like this, and it is about time we bring it to video games.

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