

“Women are treated better than men online,” says NerdBoobLootman

by Hoyden and Shaker Lauredhel

The goal of [a] small online survey [*Gender Swapping and Socializing in Cyberspace: An Exploratory Study*] was to examine issues around gender swapping in MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games). MMORPGs include such games as Everquest, World of Warcraft, and Lord OfThe Rings Online. Here, I’m taking a look at what I see as a disconnect between the data the authors present in the body of the paper, and their conclusion as presented in the abstract.

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Three of the replies to the gender-swapping question did centre around playfulness, exploration, and performativity.

Then there are these:

If you play a chick and know what the usual nerd wants to read, you will get free items ... which in turn I pass them to my other male characters ... very simple. NerdBoobLoot.

(P65, male, age 20)

Because if you make your character a woman, men tend to treat you FAR better.

(P49, male, age 23)

What made it into the abstract? This:

“[...] It was also found that 57% of gamers had engaged in

gender swapping, and it is suggested that the online female persona has a number of positive social attributes in a male-oriented environment."

The study results showed that participants had varied experiences of gender in MMPORGs, and a variety of motivations when it came to gender-swapping. Both sexes tried gender swapping out of interest, as a window into an "unknown universe." Some women gender- swap to escape harassment—not a surprising result in the least, and one replicated in all kinds of online research. Yet the authors glossed over this, preferring instead to highlight the male experience of virtual "femaleness"; and only a very specific type of "femaleness" at that.

There can be a lot of reading between the lines involved in such a superficial study, but I think P65's contribution is telling. Women aren't "treated better" in online games, as P49 asserts; the acceptance is conditional, and it's conditional on performing a certain kind of sexual availability. The man performing femaleness says you only need to "know what the usual nerd wants to read," and you get loot. He labels this "NerdBoobLoot," which suggests to me that there's more than textual interaction going on. Payment for virtual sexual displays is being interpreted by men as "women being treated better than men." Does that not boggle your mind as much as it does mine?

This brief, almost voyeuristic gender-swapping by virtual tourists seems to be hooking in to badly erroneous ideas of what it is like to be female online. What it is like to be constantly reminded of your status as a member of the sex class, to be evaluated, to be constantly subjected to covert and overt threats of sexual violence. I wonder how long the "better treatment" assessment would last if subjected to it all. the. time, in every aspect of life?

I'm going to make an educated guess that the men who were awarded the prime place in this study subscribe to a set of dangerous ideas about sexual harassment in face-to-face life also. "Women must enjoy it really," "It's a compliment," and "Wouldn't you be worried if you didn't get cat-called?" spring to mind.

So why are men being given the final say in what it's like to be female online? What is it about their faked, momentary experience that it gets to eclipse women's

actual, ongoing experience? Why is the male experience of virtual womanhood being privileged over the female experience of actual womanhood?

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Shakesville (personal blog): <http://shakespeareassister.blogspot.com/2008/05/women-are-treated-better-than-men.html>

May 26, 2008

I'm An Anonymous Woman Gamer

by Arianna Reiche

Kim Pittman is a level-designer for Toys For Bob, an Activision studio based in northern California. In addition to working in the game industry, she is herself an avid gamer: "I got into gaming because of my mother and my brother," she says. "My first conscious memory is of a video-game. I've always played them. It was just a family thing at my house."

Pittman studied at the Guildhall at Southern Methodist University, which has offered an accelerated graduate program in video-game development since 2003. "As a designer, it's kind of my job to study new games. So I try to spend thirty minutes to an hour every day playing something new: everything from Facebook games to iPhone games to Xbox 360 games. But most of what I play for my own pleasure – not deconstructing anything – is World of Warcraft."

"Even the most explicit online mud-slinging is easy to kind of ignore or just not internalize. But there's this feeling, from everyone from the readers to the active commenters to your real, flesh and blood editors, that if you get creepy responses, you were sort of just asking for it– just by mentioning you're female, or offering a 'female' perspective on something that doesn't have an exclusively female following." –Kim Pittman

Blizzard Entertainment's massive multi-player online game World of Warcraft has gained notoriety in the past decade for its die-hard, often socially reclusive fans, coupled with massive commercial success. But Pittman remains conscious of the stigma attached to advertising gender within its gameplay. "You do not share the fact that you're female," she states. "Despite the fact that I play solely female characters, everyone assumes that you're male. And when you play these games, you just let people assume you're male, because it's easier. You don't have to worry about 'creepies', you don't have to worry about people 'falling in love with you' – it's just easier. Then when you get to know people, eventually you reveal yourself. You can say 'Well, you know, I'm not really a guy,' and then you have to combat the initial disbelief. People think you're just trying to get something out of

them. I actually played with a guild in World of Warcraft for over a year, and we finally got a Vent server and were suddenly all like ‘Oh God, you really are a girl!’ I just said, ‘I’ve been telling you that for over a year now!’ They didn’t believe me.”

A 2006 statistic from the Consumer Electronics Association revealed that women ages 25-34 were out-playing men in “casual” (non-console) games by 30%. Three years later, a Nielsen report would find that women over age 25 make up the largest constituency of gamers in the United States. And in the UK, women have been projected as [making] up 48% of World of Warcraft players.

“It’s a little relieving to not be singled out as that odd girl doing something she shouldn’t be,” Pittman explains. “Video-games still have that kind of stigma – that they’re for children, or that they’re a waste of time. Over the years, as I’ve met more and more people, I’ve begun outing myself as an actual female. And more often than not speak with people you thought were male—and they’re not. Suddenly they’re like ‘Oh thank God, another woman!’ and suddenly you build these friendships where you’re just clinging to each other like someone drowning clinging to their life-jacket.”

The irony and self-perpetuation of online anonymity is not lost on female gamers and new-media users. “I went to PAX—the Penny Arcade expo up in Seattle—and it was an eye-opener. Up til that point I saw myself as something of a unicorn,” a metaphor Pittman finds particularly apt, and returns to often, “being a female gamer. At something like that, there are going to be thousands of other girls running around, just as nerdy as you, if not drastically more so. It kind of reached this point where I thought, OK, this isn’t abnormal; we shouldn’t be having to hide online, and this is unfair. I should be able to tell people I’m female and not expect crazy to come out of it.”

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For Pittman, her history of harassment in gaming [didn’t] begin and end in the digital world. Since entering the Guildhall in 2005, she has left an internship because of a co-worker’s obsessive behavior, and been asked by a previous studio’s human resources department to delineate her own definition of workplace sexual harassment (“because,” she explains “it wasn’t so much a question of if

and by what circumstances it would happen, but when it would happen, and I think they wanted to be prepared”).

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“There is no reason we should have to hide our gender to play games,” says Jennifer [of Fat, Ugly, or Slutty, a Web site that ‘outs’ abusive Xbox Live players]. “I’m not going to go all Mulan and cut my hair, deepen my voice, and wrap my boobs. The comment we get a lot is: ‘Just don’t talk or let people know you’re a girl.’ And it’s bullshit. We shouldn’t have to hide. We like games, so get over it.”

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Kotaku (game news/blog site): <http://kotaku.com/5782957/im-an-anonymous-woman-gamer>

March 17, 2011

Cheerleaders/booth babes/Halo hoes: Pro-gaming, gender, and jobs for the boys

Nick Taylor, Jen Jenson, Suzanne de Castell

'Fatal Fantasy'

The lone female regular at NerdCorps events, and one of the few female players at MLG [Major League Gaming] Toronto, Fatal Fantasy is an anomaly in the North American competitive Halo 3 LAN scene. She occupies what seems to be a contradictory position within a male-dominated community, presenting herself as both a desirable heterosexual female and as a competent competitive gamer, fully capable of 'playing with the boys'.

Fatal Fantasy is a Caucasian 17-year old high school student, who regularly attended NerdCorps events for over 2 years. On top of her extensive involvement with NerdCorps, she had also been to several MLG tournaments. While her teams did not place well in these tournaments, she is relatively successful at NerdCorps events, particularly in the 'Free For All' portions.... She is among the more vocal players during either FFA or team play, loudly dispensing strategies as well as taunts and trash-talking.

...

In this and similar instances, Fatal Fantasy shows herself to be a competent gamer and a dominant presence at NerdCorps events. Through her vocalised and embodied derision ... she positions herself as an accomplished and demanding teammate. Her performance as a self-assured female Halo 3 player complicates a discourse in which, by virtue of its connections to masculinised cultures of both mainstream sports and gaming, competitive Halo 3 is configured as the exclusive domain of young men. Her participation further stresses that there is nothing in terms of gameplay—the technological skills required, the intensive communication and coordination demanded of team play, or the stresses of

competition—that are ‘inherently’ masculine. Instead, it is the discourse that links competitive gaming with a misogynistic (and homophobic) sports tradition that makes her identity as a ‘good girl gamer’ so tenuous and contingent.

...

“Just there to game”

Fatal Fantasy’s gamer tag evokes a persona that is at once desirable and unattainable, and captures the kind of gendered identity she seems to try to maintain as one of the few female competitive gamers in the large city in which she lives. While male participants at NerdCorps events generally showed up to events in casual athletic wear (jerseys or hooded sweatshirts, baggy t-shirts, jogging or track pants), Fatal seemed to put more effort into her ‘look’—make-up, scarves and dresses. Similarly, she was alone among participants to adopt and consistently use a sexualised gamer tag.... These might be attempts to ‘own’ her sexuality, to make it visible on her terms or it could be ‘read’ as an attempt by Fatal to re-invoke, in a dominant male space, a heterosexual identity that demanded, at its most basic level, recognition of her as not just ‘one of the boys’.

In a conversation with Taylor at one of the last NerdCorps events he attended, Fatal described her participation in the male-dominated NerdCorps community and her interactions with other (casual) female participants, in ways that positioned her as a desirable woman who is nonetheless ‘off limits’ to male players. She recounted a story about another young woman who used to attend NerdCorps events regularly; according to Fatal, the young woman was infatuated with one of the more successful NerdCorps regulars, leading to a sexual encounter at an event in Fall 2007. She described the animosity the other girl had towards her, stating the other girl thought they were in “competition” for young men at the club. Fatal used this anecdote as a way to re-affirm that “she’s only there to game”.

At stake in this conversation was Fatal’s ongoing attempt to position herself within this community in which young women are most often configured as ‘Halo hoes’ (young women who, according to male NerdCorps organisers and many players, just show up to LAN tournaments to flirt with and ‘pick up’ successful or

victorious male gamers). ...

That she did so through articulating a story of another young woman whom she describes and depicts as a 'Halo ho', however, perhaps points to the complex and tenuous conditions for young women's equitable participation in this culture. Fatal articulated her own 'safe' and legitimate gendered identity primarily by contrasting her motives for coming to events against other young women who are just there "to pick up guys". The discursive construction of 'Halo hoes' simultaneously positions women as sexualised objects, incapable of participating on equal terms with men, while at the same time constructs 'pro' gamers as young, sexually desirable straight males.

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Booth babes

[T]here is one mode of female participation at both WCG and MLG that seems sanctioned, even eagerly welcomed, by male participants: 'booth babes', women who facilitate male participants' engagements with a range of products (primarily digital technologies) at promotional exhibits scattered throughout events. At the World Cyber Games in Cologne, promotional booths were set up throughout the ground floor and each featured young, slender, predominantly Caucasian women, dressed to match the booth or company's theme. For instance, at the station for graphics chip maker ATI, whose mascot is a computer graphics image of a buxom woman in Burlesque clothing, models wore fishnet stockings, tight black leather or PVC and black or red wigs. The models' responsibilities included standing by the product, greeting and handing out brochures to passers-by, running product demonstrations, and posing for photographs either by themselves or with their colleagues and/or attendees.

The imperative for these employees seems to be 'look at but don't talk to'.

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In *Game boys*, Michael Kane (2008) begins to touch on the significance these women hold in the world of competitive gaming. Describing ESPN's broadcast of the inaugural (now-defunct) Championship Gaming Series tournament in 2007,

Kane claims that by working “a few cute girls into the broadcast,” tournament organisers—with much invested in selling gaming as legitimate sport—“help push the message that gamers, despite the stereotype, are not nerdy”. In Kane’s analysis, the presence of sexualised women works to further forge the discursive connection between gamers and athletes. ... Instead of seeing these women as simply shoring up a discursive link between competitive gaming and/as ‘athletics’, it might be more productive to see them as guarding an intensely “homosocial” space from homosexual desire. In other words, the presence of highly sexualised women ensures for the male attendees that their heterosexual desire is firmly secured and on display: even more so, given that these women are ‘available’ to take pictures of/with. Their presence, and the kinds of agency required of them, helps facilitate attendees’ spectatorial engagements with typically masculinised technologies in ways that affirm, rather than threaten, a ideological link between heteronormative masculinity and technological competence.

Immoral Women: Why We Need More of Them

by Quinnae Moongazer

The reality of the situation is that the portrayal of women as pure, stainless alabaster icons of virtue is a huge problem that arises from cultural stereotypes of women. The notion that women are inherently more virtuous, kinder, and so on is part of the limiting and fetishising pedestalisation that serves to fence us off from being thought of as persons. Human beings are flawed characters with failings and weaknesses; angels are not.

When I call for 'good portrayals' I do not mean that all women should be virtuous. On the contrary, I actually want to see more women as villains, or as morally grey/dubious characters. The simple reason for this is that such figures can be fascinating, merit much discussion, and are fully human.

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My objection to femme fatale villains is not that they are villains, but that women's agency is always reduced to sexuality in such portrayals. Consider the Drow from *Dungeons & Dragons*, for instance. The women are defined by rampant, unchained sexuality that is used to literally dominate men. There's nothing interesting in this, save as a rather specific form of pornography perhaps. Moral weakness, failure, compromise, and villainy are about much more complicated motivations than luring men to their dooms with T&A.

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[*Dragon Age 2's*] Knight-Commander Meredith is one such person. She is introduced to you quite forthrightly, her sword running through a powerful Mage on the verge of killing you. But she quickly evolves into an adversarial force. Meredith is a holy Templar commander driven by her desire to ensure that the Circle Mages under her command in Kirkwall are kept under control and do not become blood mages or abominations. With this in mind, she justifies

increasingly onerous restrictions on their freedom. A literal red scare takes hold of her city as she sees the dreaded “blood mages” around every corner, purges becoming a regular feature of life in the city of Kirkwall. But through it all it’s impossible to walk away feeling Meredith has not thought this through. She commits moral wrongs in the name of moral rectitude; her convictions are deeply held and premised on fear of Mages with freedom causing widespread destruction. Meredith has considered all the arguments against her ideology. She is, you learn, painfully aware of the hurt she causes but believes strongly that she is resolutely holding back the tide of a greater evil.

To challenge her is to only compel her to stand her ground, and in a stentorian voice that feels like living scripture, she enjoins you to give her a better solution to this Gordian knot of a crisis between Templars and Mages. If you cannot—and indeed your character cannot—“then do not brand me a tyrant!” she thunders.

This is how you write a villain, and this is how you portray a woman as a human.

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The Border House (group blog): <http://borderhouseblog.com/?p=8000>

March 6, 2012

Feminism and Video Games 101: Shooting Female Enemies Isn't Icky

By Alex R

I almost never read Kotaku, let alone the comments. But I found this comment on the post about the lack of female characters in *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* via Stephen Totilo's Twitter and thought it was worth discussing. The comment, written by Kotaku reader Friedhamster, reads as follows:

We fight as men because we're fighting men.

As soon as we fight as females we have to fight females.

(Bayonetta and Jeanne.)

I have no qualms about dumping round after round into a dude's face made of pixels. I do have an issue with doing the same to, even, a virtual female. I wouldn't feel right about that. I just wouldn't.

...

So where does this ickiness the commenter is talking about come from? In the ensuing comments, Kotaku reader Holly Green gets to the heart of the matter:

Its not hating women to shoot one in a video game. You shoot men in video games, do you hate men?

Your hesitancy seems to be based in the notion that women are fragile and need protecting.

To which Friedhamster replies, "You got it buddy." His hesitancy about shooting female enemies in games comes from a sense of chivalry.

Chivalry, as most of our readers likely know, is sexist. It is based, as Holly Green

said, on the idea that women are weak and need a man to protect them. Obviously this is extremely condescending and untrue—women don't need special protections any more than men do. This logic has been used to actually deny women rights, with the excuse that it is "for their own good." Friedhamster exposes this line of thought when he compares killing women in a game to how killing children is all but banned in games: how insulting is it to imply that women and children are somehow equal, similarly helpless and in need of protecting? (Answer: extremely insulting!)

Chivalry is also behind the idea that women are somehow purer or better than men; Friedhamster indicates this when he refers to women as "the finer sex." But that logic is also sexist and limiting; it allows people to hold women to a higher standard of behavior than men, when the reality is we are all flawed human beings. In short, chivalry is just a way of policing women's behavior under the guise of it being beneficial or a compliment to women.

...

As an advocate for better representation of women in games, I believe it's important to have female "grunts" or "cannon fodder" enemies in games, almost as much as having our Jades and our Commander Shepards. And many games do have female enemies that are treated the same as their male counterparts: BioShock, the Mass Effect games, and Dragon Age, to name a few.

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The Border House (group blog): <http://borderhouseblog.com/?p=1816>

12 March 2010

The Gendering of Computer Gaming: Experience and Space

by Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter

Various explanations have been advanced to explain [the] apparent difference in the popularity of computer gaming between males and females. Within this two strands of argument can be discerned: game content and gaming contexts. Obviously aspects of these are interlinked in complex ways and generally relate to social gender dynamics and the manner in which these influence the production and consumption of contemporary leisure activities.

The first strand of argument relating to the lack of female participation in computer gaming relates to the nature of the games themselves. It has been claimed that games are gendered in such a way as to make them uninteresting and/or offensive to females. Such arguments point to the violent content and generally 'male' themes of games, and evidence that males show greater preference for games with a violent theme. These explanations claim that the gendered nature of computer games prevent females from identifying with game characters, goals and settings. It has also been claimed that the lack of female characters in games, and the stereotypical and sexualised portrayal of those female characters which are included is another factor explaining the lack of popularity of computer gaming as leisure activity among females. These explanations tend to focus on gendered aspects of computer games as produced by males, for a male audience, and incorporate themes recognisably 'male'.

It has been claimed that the increasing sophistication of graphics, narrative and game play in contemporary games allows greater immersion in the game environment and involvement in the game space. Game spaces are essentially expanded and more complex game or leisure environments which support multiplayer and competitive gaming, highlighting the use of the internet for online gaming and competitive multiplayer gaming.

Games developers have also become increasingly sensitive to claims regarding

the stereotypical portrayal of women in computer games and the lack of female characters, and many contemporary games allow the choice between a number of male and female characters. But it remains to be seen whether adding more female characters will encourage character identification and increase female participation in gaming.

Video: Revision3 Interview with Erin Robinson, developer of Puzzle Bots

Top comments on YouTube:

Wow, she's pretty cute.

NinjaRunningWild 1 year ago

Erin's pretty hot. And talented

alexhart1986 1 year ago

erin hot erin hot erin hot, yes.

CornParticulates 4 months ago

I think I'm in love with this Erin chick.

Oh, boy...

agirotto1 7 months ago

18 to 35

By Meg Stivison

I usually feel pretty good about being a woman working in games. Sure, other feminists protest, and write books, and pass legislation. Women around the world risk injury or prosecution. But my huge move for women's equality is doing a job I really like, and working in an industry I really like, and being good at it — all without having a penis!

Sometimes, being a woman in the games industry is a bit like my years as a foreigner in China, when every so often characteristics I'm barely even aware of become huge and noteworthy. In Yantai, it was more, That's a foreigner! Buying apples! Whoa! In games, I'll be doing something I do all the time, and encounter shock that I am a woman doing that. That's a girl! Doing game-related math! Whoa!

And, whenever someone visiting our offices mentions the startling fact that we have women working in computer games, I am ready with stats on how 18- to 35-year-old women are the fastest growing market share in games, or how casual games are growing in number and profitability, especially [among] women.

This is a difficult codeswitching for me. I want [to] propose game content in terms of how it will be fun for players, but that makes folks in my office laugh at me, and not in the good way. It is a constant effort for me to reframe "my players will love this activity!" as "players engaging this activity will monetize [at] this rate".

So, the other day, when I was told again how surprising it is to see women in a game studio, and especially a woman in game design, I was quick to respond with my prepared stats.

"Women from 18 to 35 are a fast-growing market share." I said "They monetize highly in casual games."

"They got all that money from the eighteen- to thirty-five-year old men they

divorced.” I was told.

I couldn’t force a laugh at this witticism, but that’s okay because it wasn’t intended as a joke. When the speaker registered my reaction to this, he told me it was ok to say because he knows so many wealthy ex-wives.

Of course I’m furious at being confronted with that mentality. I’m annoyed that this person will have a marked effect on the profitability and longevity of my project. I’m also annoyed at how vague I’ve got to be on the identity of the speaker, instead of calling out this person on the extreme level of sexism, because there could be very direct career consequences. (And, in a less direct way, because women who express this sort of indignation are quickly characterized as strident harpies, as tough to work with, and so forth.)

I’d thought I was changing gender expectations by working in games. Turns out, I wasn’t really expected to be working at all.

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Simpson’s Paradox (personal blog): <http://simpsonsparadox.com/2012/02/18-to-35.html>

2 Feb 2012

Interview with Roberta Williams

by Philip Jong

No adventure game designer had ever achieved the level of success as Roberta Heuer Williams (Roberta Williams) had. Born in 1953, she and her husband Ken Williams co-founded On-Line Systems, which later became Sierra On-Line, when she was only 26. Mystery House, which she wrote in 1979, was the first graphic adventure game ever created for the PC. Her portfolio of games, spanning over nearly 20 years, had single-handedly heralded the arrival of the graphic adventure genre and the demise of interactive fiction.

...

Interviewer: You became the first woman to achieve critical success as a game designer, developer, and publisher in an industry that, at the time, was dominated by men. What unjust criticisms or resentments had you or your games received during the earlier years of your career? It was because of you that other female game designers, such as Jane Jensen and Lori Ann Cole, could successfully break into the game industry. What changes over time did you witness in the attitude toward women by the game industry during your career at Sierra On-Line?

Roberta Williams: *I really think that the idea that women are somehow 'punished' or 'resented' in the computer industry is overblown. I never experienced any resentments or maltreatment by anybody in the computer industry about my gender. Never. In fact, it was the opposite; I always felt that the 'men' in the computer industry were happy to have me around. I never felt that it was a gender thing.*

I think that, perhaps, why you don't see a lot of women in the computer game industry (I don't know; maybe it's different today and there a lot of them) is because, at least in the old days,

computer games and computers just weren't the focus of the average woman or girl. In other words, the women/girls themselves just weren't that interested.

Now, you could say that that was because the games weren't designed with females in mind (which was probably true because the 'boys' were designing them...for themselves!), but, computers just weren't something that, at least in those days, the average woman was interested in. Even a lot of men in those days weren't all that interested in computers! Nowadays things are different; computers have become more friendly, understandable, and lots of years and thought have been put into developing software to convince all sorts of people that they want and need a computer in their daily lives. But, in those days, none of that was true.

But, back to the 'female' thing: No, I never experienced any problem with being a female in a so-called male-dominated field. They were happy to have me. It was just really up to me to actually 'put' myself there. If more women want to be a part of the computer industry today, they just have to do more to put themselves there. Nobody, in reality, is keeping them out...in my opinion, anyway.

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Adventure Classic Gaming: <http://www.adventureclassicgaming.com/index.php/site/interviews/198/>

16 July 2006