

“You Play Like a Girl!” Cross Gender Competition and the Uneven Playing Field

Elena Bertozzi, Asst. Professor, Multimedia Digital Arts
University of Wisconsin, Whitewater

Many reasons have been suggested for the lack of female participation in technologically complex digital game play. A previously unconsidered factor is that of cross gender competition. Rigid gender divisions are the norm in most analog/traditional games and sports. Societal penalties for breaking these norms are severe for both males and females. This paper suggests that the virtual certainty of cross gender competition might be a factor in deterring females from digital game play. The ease of transgressing traditional play taboos in virtual worlds, however, allows both males and females to explore and possibly transform rigid gender configurations. Policy implications for using play as a way to break down stereotypes and encourage the participation of females are discussed.

Keywords: play, gender, cross gender play, sports, technology, virtual worlds, digital, analog games

Introduction

Much has been written about why females don't play the same games or as many digital games as males do. It is now estimated that females play digital games at least as often as males do, but the levels of complexity of games varies widely (Dillon, 2006). Lucas & Sherry (2004) define casual/traditional games (those preferred by females) as “non-mental rotation games” and console or complex PC games (preferred by males) as “mental rotation games.” These terms suggest that playing “mental rotation” games requires an additional level of training and immersion not required by traditional games. The lack of female engagement in this sphere matters because participating in complex digital play¹ is a predictor of confidence in and competence with digital technology (AAUW, 2000, Bertozzi and Lee, 2007, Oxford, 2005) . Some have suggested that the representation of women as passive sex objects prevents women from fully engaging in the medium while others have posited that the emphasis on violent/shooting based conflict keeps females from being interested in this type of play (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998, Heintz-Knowles, 2001, Schleiner, 1998, Oxford, 2005). For years, it has been argued that females value social behavior and positive values and that as soon as games of this type emerge, females will play them. Over the last couple of years, several games have been published that meet these criteria (Final Fantasy, Animal Crossing, World of Warcraft, SIMS) and there have been significant increases in female players of these

¹ This is to differentiate digital games such as Solitaire, Tetris, or other games which do not require specialized equipment, software, or training from games like World of Warcraft, Counter-Strike, Civilization IV, et. al. which are much more complicated to learn and play.

games². If anything though, the popularity of these games among males demonstrates that males do not require stereotypical representations of females or violence to enjoy digital gameplay and that they value social interaction as much as females do.

The lack of female engagement in digital play is related to deeply rooted understandings of gender differences in the culture at large. Playgrounds such as poker tables, Monopoly boards or levels of Halo are affected by gender politics in the larger culture. Players can certainly make a conscious decision to avoid or ignore them, but they exist and affect the play process in both conscious and unconscious ways. It is possible that males seek to play with males and females with females in part because single gender playgrounds are arenas in which players feel somewhat freed from having to deal with the complexities of cross gender interactions which affect every other area of their lives.

Researchers have documented the ways in which gender politics are reconstructed in digital worlds (Yee, 2004, Yee, 2006, Schleiner, 1998, Taylor, 2006). In Everquest, for example, players can choose to play as either male or female avatars. The gender of the avatar makes absolutely no difference to the actual abilities or capacities of the avatar. The world is constructed to be gender neutral. Players, however, are affected by the sex of the avatar in that they treat avatars differently based on their appearance. A delicate-looking female avatar will receive more offers of help and collaboration than a male ogre avatar will. Players are very sensitive to gender politics and are often very savvy about playing as a certain type of avatar when they wish to solicit different types of reactions from other players. Many players will play as both male and female avatars under

² It is currently estimated that 16% of WOW players are female
YEE, N. (2006) WoW Gender-Bending. Daedalus Project. while a surprising 46% of SIMS players are male
MICROSOFT (2004) Women get in the game. Microsoft..

different circumstances, either for strategic advantage or because it allows them to replay a game and experience a different set of circumstances.

Given that digital play offers a considerable amount of gender plasticity through avatars, it might seem illogical for gender stereotypes and concerns to persist in digital gaming, but they do³. Players of digital games are sexed and the sex of the player matters. The preponderance of male players in complex digital games makes it virtually certain that females who play these digital games will be playing against males.

This paper considers the possibility that gender differences in digital play are strongly influenced by the unwillingness of both genders to cross traditional, culturally gendered play lines. The fact that females are routinely punished for challenging males on what is perceived to be their turf may be an important factor in deterring women from digital play. When males play against players whom they believe to be female, they are affected by a range of cultural norms including: standards of civility, their own self definition as male, and culturally sanctioned expressions of sexual desire. When females play against players whom they believe to be male, they are affected by similar issues, but from a different perspective. Analysis of gender differences in digital play behavior should consider these factors. In a huge range of game/play activities, including digital gameplay, some females are competing or attempting to compete at the same level as males. They are forging new paths in difficult territory. If we recognize the significance and level of difficulty of challenging existing norms, we can better support their initiatives and create structures to help others join them.

³ See Castronova's
CASTRONOVA, E. (2003) *The price of 'man' and 'woman': A hedonic pricing model of avatar attributes in a synthetic world*. CESifo Working Paper Series No. 957. article on gendered avatar pricing for an example of how these stereotypes are concretized economically.

Civility and Chivalry

When males and females play against one another, problems arise. Although there has recently been much lamenting about the death of civility and concern that young people are growing up without manners, we still have very strongly felt beliefs about how males and females should interact with one another. Of the most relevant, in terms of play, is that it is wrong for males to be aggressive towards females. Our cultural history includes the understanding that males should be protective of women and seek to help them if they require it. This understanding was, of course, based on the idea that females are the “weaker sex” and required protection and dominance from a strong male.

Although we are moving past this perception to some degree, there is no question that public demonstration of violence or aggression from a male towards a female remains culturally unacceptable. Such behavior brings to mind issues of wife beating, rape and other serious crimes. Many males are thus understandably reluctant to engage in any behavior that might even suggest aggression towards a female for fear that this might be misinterpreted.

A boy on a coed football squad -- or playing against a coed squad -- faces an irreconcilable conflict between his duty as a man and his duty as a player. As a man, he must never strike a woman. As a player he must strike teammates during scrimmages, and opposing players during games, fairly and within the rules but with all the force he can muster. (Jeffrey, 2004)

It is therefore complicated to have males and females on certain types of playgrounds, participating as equals. If a male were playing against another male, he would use a number of aggressive tactics including: physical proximity, verbal taunting,

feints, and actual aggression, among other things. It can be very difficult for a male to understand how much and to what degree he can use these kinds of behaviors when playing against a female opponent. In order to truly treat each other as equals, males and females have to willfully attempt to ignore years of cultural conditioning which codifies inequality.

These difficulties can, however, be overcome if the concept of “play” is correctly understood and applied. The philosophical premise of play is that whosoever steps onto the “sacred space” (Huizinga, 1955) of the playing field sheds any discrimination/bias/advantage accrued to him or her outside of the playing field. Within that physical space and within the constraints of the rules of that game, contestants are measured purely by their ability to perform that particular action, in that particular place, at that particular time. The success of females at high school wrestling where female often compete on teams with and against males, for example, demonstrates that this can be accomplished even for contact sports.⁴

Consequences of Challenging Males

Despite the many changes in male/female relations over the past 50 years and the goals attained by women’s rights movements in a variety of areas, play of almost all kinds remains rigidly gendered. From birth, children are given toys and encouraged to play in ways that reinforce cultural stereotypes of gender appropriateness (Martin and Ruble, 2004, Serbin et al., 2001). ToysRUs, Mattel, and other toy production and sales

⁴ “In 2004-05, there were 4,334 girls competing in wrestling on the high school level. This total has increased every year since 1990. This actual number is much higher, as some states that have women competitors do not report them.” ABBOTT, G. (2006) Women’s high school wrestling continues growth with CIF Regional Tournaments. USA Wrestling.

companies have separate product and sales teams for products aimed at separate gender markets. Studies on sex role stereotypes demonstrate that in fact little has changed in the public’s perception of what constitute masculine and feminine traits (Broverman et al., 1972, Conway and Vartanian, 2000). Video game environments tend to emphasize the differences between gendered avatars rather than diminish them (Ray, 2004). Females often have enormous breasts in relation to their other body parts, male avatars are muscular and heroic. Although this is often presented as a reason why females don’t play video games, Waem, Larrison and Neren found that hyper-sexualized avatars are actually preferred by both male and female players (2005).

One result of Title IX legislation has been to encourage females to play more and to provide them with better equipment and better training (Dowling, 2000, Roberts, 2005). Enormous gains have been made in female sporting achievement as a result of this legislation. If anything though, these gains have further demarcated the “separate but equal” approach to sports education in the U.S. Play is fundamentally about power: who has the right to exercise it and how it is exercised (Bertozzi, 2003). Many kinds of play behavior reward aggression, competition and violence within a system of checks and balances that control how these behaviors are expressed. Traditional male play behaviors often reward players for engaging in these behaviors appropriately. Males are thus taught that seeking power through socially sanctioned means is appropriate and will result in deserved rewards. Interviews with CEOs and other successful businessmen often mention past or current participation in sporting events that have helped them create a ‘winning’ work ethic.

Females who wish to play sports that require aggressivity, competitiveness and controlled violence can be subject to conflicting views of what is socially sanctioned behavior. The social conditioning of female children continues to stress nurturing, friendliness, and passivity as gender appropriate behavior. Yet when girls get on the soccer or basketball team, different behavior is required in order for them to achieve personal and team success. Long-time basketball coach, Kathleen DeBoer published a book detailing differences between male and female teams and how coaches must understand these differences in order to coach successfully⁵ (2004). She points out that it is very challenging to coach women in part because so much of the process of training successful athletes runs counter to the ways in which girls are socialized from birth.

It is clear, however, that more and more females are able to counter this socialization. Aggressive, competitive female play can be seen in the increasing popularity of youth soccer, basketball and a range of other less visible sports such as weight lifting and wrestling. The film Million Dollar Baby publicized female participation in a competitive activity so brutally destructive that many have argued that it is not play at all (boxing). Increasingly capable and competent females who optimize their performance and excel in their chosen sports, raise the issue of cross gender competition. The sporting ethic challenges players to pit themselves against the most challenging opponents, and in many cases those opponents are male. When females challenge males to play, however, they challenge much more than the individual or team they want to play against. Cross gender challenges call into question the whole social order.

⁵ Although a fascinating description of how gender norms are enforced and perpetuated through play, the book unfortunately simply presents these gender stereotypes as givens that coaches must adapt themselves to rather than suggesting how we might go about changing them.

Existing play norms reify and perpetuate power differences between males and females in society at large. One of the principal philosophical tenets of gameplay is that all players are equal before the game. (Huizinga, 1955) Thus, challenging someone else to play can be a revolutionary act if the challenging player is not, in fact, considered equal according to current cultural norms. When black boxers competed against white boxers in the early 20th century, for example, much more was at stake than simply who was the better boxer. (Ward, 2004) Jessie Owens at the 1936 Olympics, the integration of blacks into white major league sports associations and the boycotting of South African teams because of apartheid all dealt with the question of equality. The presence of black athletes in play competition with white athletes in and of itself posited that they were equals, which is why racist power structures fought so aggressively to keep blacks out of these venues. Although great strides have been made in gender equality under the law, females are not, in fact, considered equal to men either in the society at large or in play. This is demonstrated very clearly by the intensity of the response to the very idea of cross gender play.

The tenacity of gender stereotypes becomes apparent when women attempt to cross the boundary lines and compete on the same terms as males. The fact that the female place kicker for the University of Colorado football team was subjected to constant hazing and then raped (CNN, 2004), is an example of how females can be overtly punished for putting themselves on par with men. The response to events like these often suggests that the harm inflicted on the female in question was somehow deserved because she put herself in a place where she didn't belong.

Only a few female kickers have played college football, but female high school players are more common. The National Federation of State High

School Associations (NFHS), which represents state governing bodies for high school sports, says 1,477 girls participated on the tackle football teams last year at 306 U.S. high schools.

That's a national disgrace. There is a connection between the increasing disrespect shown to women in our society and an ultra-feminist ideology that pushes teenage girls to play a brutal contact sport with teenage boys.(Jeffrey, 2004)

According to this columnist, girls are not freely choosing to participate in football. They are the unwitting pawns of feminist ideology which places them in an arena in which they are certain to be hurt. This ignores the obvious point that the place kicker in question was not hurt on the field, but in the locker rooms and other social settings and that she was hurt by her own teammates, not by contact with the opposing team. When Annika Sorenson dared to challenge the men of the PGA, the media hubbub went on for weeks. Some of Sorenson's male colleagues made extremely unsportsmanlike comments regarding her ability despite her clear demonstration of competence.

WOODRUFF: ..., fans of Annika Sorenson would like to believe that golfer Vijay Singh is eating a big plate of crow for dinner tonight. He's the man who said Sorenstam -- quote -- "doesn't belong here with the men of the PGA Tour." And today, Sorenstam (sic) became the first woman since World War II to play at a PGA event, the Colonial in Fort Worth, Texas. And judging by her game and her game alone, she belonged there. (CNN, 2003)

Ambivalence towards players who represent themselves as females in digital games has been reported by many players. A player using a female avatar is very frequently subject to sexual innuendo and communication from other players that focuses on aspects of the female body, clothes she is wearing, etc. In her discussion of how she was treated differently while playing as male and female-identified avatars in online poker environments, Slimmer points out that some males become extremely aggressive when

beaten by a player using a female-identified avatar, and that her decision to play as a male-identified avatar resulted in part from real fear of retaliation from enraged male players (2007). This hostility towards women who dare to challenge gender norms in play is due to the fact that their presence on the playing field calls into question the very definition of masculinity.

Masculine Cultural Play Norms

Cultural norms are often reflected in banter, jokes, idiom and insults. Despite the media presence of many strong and athletically talented women, “You play/throw/kick like a girl” remains a potent insult. When males play in groups, gendered terms such as “sissy”, “pussy” and “fag”, are used as normal and acceptable putdowns. Some males have to differentiate themselves from females in order to prove their masculinity. In a culture where male traits are valued more highly than female, this process often involves devaluing and ‘dissing’ females and female traits (Messner, 2002). In fact, publicly devaluing females and feminine traits is considered by some researchers to be an integral part of the development of a culturally accepted “male” gender persona (Butler, 1990, Connell, 1987, Tolman et al., 2003, Nelson, 1994). In digital gameplay, male conversational exchanges often emphasize the establishment of maleness through choice of language and the explicit enunciation of heterosexist norms (Herring, 2001). Other researchers have argued that in digital gameplay it is even more important for males to establish aggressive masculinity through language precisely because the male body is not present and can only be elicited through speech (Alix, 2007).

When a female steps onto the playing field as an equal, it is disruptive to deeply engrained cultural norms that males are different from females, males are

better/stronger/more competent than females, and that males are more aggressive/competitive than females. In cultures where heterosexist cultural norms are especially powerful, in those very few sporting/play activities where males compete on the same level as females, the sport is branded as somehow “gay” or appropriate only for homosexual men. In the United States these activities include competitive horseback riding events such as dressage and hunter/jumper competitions and dance of any kind.⁶ The fact that calling someone or some activity “gay” remains an insult, further underscores the tenacity of traditional binary gender roles in both analog and digital play activities.

The devaluation of the female in the culture at large creates a dilemma when males and females do compete. The stakes are particularly high for a male in this situation, especially if there are spectators. When a male is competing against a female, he is in a lose/lose situation. If he defeats his female opponent, it is not much of a victory, because the cultural expectation is that she is weak anyway. Beating an opponent that is known to be weaker can actually be seen as a kind of humiliation for the winner in this context. If he loses to the female, however, his defeat is compounded by the humiliation of having been defeated by “a girl.” If this occurs in front of male spectators he is likely to hear about it for a long time afterward. In digital environments this can mean extensive online discussion about a player’s masculine credentials.

Female unwillingness to excel at cross gender play

Can we then assume that cross gender competition is a win/win situation for females? If the female loses against the male, she is still admired for having dared to challenge someone “superior” to her. If she wins, however, her victory has a different

⁶ The film Billy Elliot explored the gender issues of ballet.

sort of taint to it. There are several terms in Western culture for women who dominate men: “shrew,” “bitch,” and “ballbreaker,” for example. A man who is dominated by a woman, can be called “pussy-whipped” among other such terms.

Although a woman who defeats a man publicly at play does enjoy the extra status of beating a “tough” opponent, she also risks being branded with one of these extremely negatively-valenced terms. If for a male, being beaten by a female is a form of emasculation, then the female who beats him is the agent. She, by winning, risks emasculating him by beating him at play. This is its own sort of catch-22. The female athlete, like any other athlete, simply wants to defeat anyone else in her class. She wants to compete against, and hopefully defeat the strongest contestants in her sport. In competing against a male, however, she has other stakes to consider. If she wins, she demonstrates her own superiority and at the same time is potentially responsible for inflicting a sort of societal harm upon her opponent.

Given the cultural norms that correlate femininity with passivity, females who dare to compete and win at the same level as males often find it necessary to emphasize the fact that they remain sexually “female.” Florence Joyner, a world record holder in track and field, was notorious for her bright pink running suits and impossibly long nails. Female tennis, a sport long associated with powerful women and lesbianism (Nelson, 1994) now has female players who emphasize their femininity with the type of clothing they wear and their off-court behavior. A recent article in the New York Times on top-level female chess players pointed out that the top women players are ranked not only on how well they play the game, but also on their looks (McLain, 2005). Such behavior suggests that women are not just focusing on success in the game, but are at the same

time concerned with protecting their status as sexually viable females because they feel that this status may be threatened by their successes in play. This may in part explain why hypersexualized avatars are often chosen as self-representations.

Another reason for choosing not to defeat males is that the act of doing so may make it more difficult for the female athlete to have sexual relationships with males. Given that male/female sexual relationships continue to reflect cultural stereotypes, a female who is known as someone capable of defeating males (thus potentially emasculating them) may encounter difficulties finding male sexual partners off the playing field. In my game design classes, I routinely ask the males in the class if they would date someone who is able to beat them at the games they consider themselves best at. They always say, “No” except for the few that say, “It depends how hot she is.” Given the societal cost of defeating men, it is not a surprise that many women prefer to maintain their status as sexually attractive rather than choosing to be dominant.⁷

The “it depends” comment cited above, however, does seem to indicate a change in attitudes. There has been a definite increase in the portrayal of strong, competitive athletic females as sexually attractive. Some female singers such as Madonna, for example include physically challenging routines in their performances that show off their sleekly muscled bodies. Advertisements for sportswear aimed at females now often are images of powerful-looking women making statements that suggest that they revel in their athletic abilities. “Working out” is now a common activity among females both old and young and many popular women’s magazines promote a more physically powerful female self-image (Fitness, Self, and Women’s Health, for example).

⁷ A grant proposal to study to empirically measure the effects of cross gender competition and its effect on sexual relationships was submitted to the National Science Foundation by the author in January 2007.

Some have argued, however, that the importance of fitness can be seen as just another way of pressuring women to obsess about and objectify their bodies rather than in fact empowering women (Tiggemann and Williamson, 2000, Markula, 2001).

Researchers and doctors who deal with anorexic patients have noted that there are pro-anorexia websites where girls compete to see who can get by on the least amount of food per day and/or work out for the longest amount of time (Williams, 2006). Ryan’s (1995) work on sports such as ice-skating and gymnastics, found that these sports promote an ideal of fitness which is in fact damaging to a healthy adult female body and which idealizes traditional norms of femininity.

The anachronistic lack of ambivalence about femininity in both sports is part of their attraction, hearkening back to a simpler time when girls were girls, when women were girls for that matter: coquettish, malleable, eager to please. In figure skating especially, we want our athletes thin, graceful, deferential and cover-girl pretty (Ryan, 1995, p. 25).

These analyses suggest that play activities may provide women with physical, mental and emotional strength and help them become more competent and capable in many areas of life, but that for some, the recent emphasis on fitness for women perpetuates an ethos in which females manipulate their bodies, sometimes in explicitly damaging ways, in order to be more attractive to males.

Women on Top

Another phenomenon noted by several writers in this area is the difference between males and females in terms of how they regard individual excellence at any given sporting activity. DeBoer points out that males are always jockeying for higher ranking within the group and thus encourage others in their own group as well as their

competitors to be the best they can possibly be. Males respect individual peak performance and reward those who attain it. Females, on the other hand, can punish individual excellence within the group. Social leveling and social harmony are higher values in female groups than encouraging individuals to attain and express personal peak performance (DeBoer, 2004, p. 34). In her recent book Self Made Man, Nora Vincent changes her appearance and “passes” as a man for a six-month period. The book describes many interesting differences between the ways that males and females behave alone and in groups. One of the most relevant for the purposes of this paper is her description of joining a male bowling club. She was a terrible bowler and certainly no asset to her team. Her description of this experience focuses on the way in which the other teammates responded to her performance. She states that the other men in the bowling alley, both on her team and among her competitors, were embarrassed for her. They were not embarrassed BY her, but concerned that her inability to perform well at this sport might lower her own self esteem. She is surprised by the fact that all the other players genuinely wanted her to improve her performance.

But their motivation [to help her/him] seemed comically atavistic, as if it were just painful to watch a fellow male fail repeatedly at something as adaptive as throwing a boulder. Time was, the tribe’s survival depended on it. This just seemed mandatory to them in some absurdly primal way.

As men they felt compelled to fix my ineptitude rather than be secretly happy about it and try to abet it under the table, which is what a lot of female athletes of my acquaintance would have done. I remember this from playing sports with and against women all my life. No fellow female athlete ever tried to help me with my game or give me tips. It was every woman for herself. It wasn’t enough that you were successful. You wanted to see your sister fail (Vincent, 2006, p. 44).

The unwillingness of females to help other females improve their status has also been documented in digital play and is directly related to the fact that attributes

associated with winning, with success in the game, tend to be associated with “masculine” traits and that part of being “male” is dissing females and female traits. In Slimmer’s discussion of online poker, she describes a gender-dissonant moment:

In one confusing moment, I was playing as male and involved in a hand with a player who was doubly identified as female--the username included the word "girl" and the player had uploaded an image of an attractive woman to serve as an avatar. When one of the four cards that would give her the best hand fell on the river and she won the large pot, a litany of sexist vulgarities formed in my head and I had to step away from the computer to keep from typing them all in. Once the initial rage subsided, I was floored by how quickly such phrases--some of which had been directed towards me and others that were certainly more hurtful than any man could come up with--had come to mind. I am still wrestling with how much of this impulse stemmed from my own cultural assumptions about how men behave (or how I think they think they should behave) and how much may have stemmed from subconscious identifications with such invective.(2007, p. 1)

Males tend to use play as a way of determining their rank and status within a group. Ranking in the group is achieved by ability/success at the game in question. Rank is mobile. A male can raise or lower his ranking by his play performance at any given time. One of the appealing things about play is that, unlike ‘real life’, there is always the chance to play the game again. There is always the opportunity to make the attempt to prove yourself as better than you were the last time. DeBoer points out that although males are playing for the team, they are also always playing for themselves. Better individual performance (within limits) is better for the team overall. Males tend to want each other to excel and respect each other for the levels of excellence achieved. (DeBoer, 2004, Vincent, 2006) Competitiveness between males is overt, socially acceptable and rewarded by status.

Competitiveness between females is much more problematic. Generally it is not overt and often does not lead to positive outcomes. Recent books such as Odd Girl Out and the film Mean Girls have documented the “culture of hidden female aggression” (Simmons, 2002). Overt female aggression and competitiveness have long been discouraged, but this does not signify that females are any less interested in achieving higher status and pursuing their own personal best interests. Evolutionary theory demonstrates that there is always competition for scarce resources and status within groups. Discouraged, and often punished by cultural norms, female aggression is often more subtle, nuanced and emotionally wounding. Unlike males who can publicly challenge one another to a contest, females tend to express aggression through social shunning and verbal harassment. It is much more difficult to confront this kind of aggression. It is also very complicated for an individual female to figure out how to improve her status.

Social status among young females continues to be determined by different criteria than it is among males. Rather than achieving status through physical strength, athletic skill, or intellectual achievement as is common among males, female rank is often determined by beauty, thinness, blondness, and attractiveness to males. Unfortunately, this does not appear to have changed significantly over the last twenty years. In 1984, Weisfeld, et al. in a study on social dominance in adolescence found that: “Boys seem to strive for social success mainly through competence in athletics, and girls through cultivating an attractive appearance.” (p.115) When Simmons asked young girls the traits of the “ideal girl,” the top five characteristics were: “Very thin, Pretty, Blond, Fake, Stupid.”(Simmons, 2002, p. 124) She summarizes her results: “The ideal girl is

stupid, yet manipulative. She is dependent and helpless, yet she uses sex and romantic attachments to get power. She is popular yet superficial. She is fit, but not athletic or strong.” (Simmons, 2002, p. 126) In a 2003 study on the importance of facial attractiveness to social ranking, the authors found that attractiveness was a significant factor in social dominance and particularly so among females.(Gary *et al.*, 2003)

Female status appears to be determined by factors that are difficult to change (prettiness, thinness). It is thus much more difficult for a female to raise her status in the group. She cannot overtly compete against other females in the way males can. These factors relate to how females engage in gameplay. Not only is overt competition discouraged, but it can also be punished by social ostracism and shunning. Girls learn to be cautious about whether or not to seek improved status within a group and how to go about achieving it. They may also be reluctant to engage in any kind of activity that further diminishes their status in the female hierarchy (becoming very physically fit and/or more dominant, for example). In digital gameplay, however, these considerations disappear. Any player can choose to represent him/herself as thin, blond, pretty, and stupid and all avatars are fake by definition. Digital play offers female players the opportunity represent themselves in a way that makes them look like a high ranking analog female, but it also makes the ranking moot given that anyone can achieve it and many players do.

The more fixed nature of female social hierarchy may affect another aspect of gameplay as well. In his thesis on a group of professional female Counter-Strike players in Denmark (Team All 4 One), Tobe Vesterby noticed that these women were proud of the fact that they were the only women in a large pool of men. When younger female

players attracted attention in the gaming world, these older women did not appear to be interested in networking with them or helping them be successful in this extremely competitive and chauvinistic world. In fact, the All 4 One team used the word “starfuckers” to describe these women. The implication being that these younger women were playing Counter-Strike just to draw attention to themselves as women rather than because they were serious players. Vesterby states:

I was a little surprised by her [Tibi's] view that since the scene has grown, more 'lamers' [inexperienced/less serious players] have appeared, and that more girls did not mean equity, but rather brought more 'badmouthing'. So rather than creating a more balanced gender space by an influx of female gamers Tibi [a member of the All 4 One team] feels that the situation for women in this cyber place has actually worsened. (2005, p. 65)

In her book, Female Chauvinist Pigs, Ariel Levy (2005) describes this phenomenon on a larger cultural level. She describes women who have succeeded in male dominated fields as “loophole women” who enjoy and exploit the fact that there are few women around them because this increases their uniqueness and cachet. They are, in fact, invested in ensuring that other women do NOT succeed in order to maintain this status.

An interview with a senior World of Warcraft player (Lehtonen, 2007), however, suggests that the situation, at least in WOW, is more complicated. She points out that women who have invested a great deal of time and energy into raising their ranking in MMPORGs have done generally through diligence, practice and careful construction of social relationships with other players. Hostility towards new female players does exist, but only if those females come into the game and attempt to circumvent the laborious process of earning status in the group through “serious” gameplay. Some females come

into the game and use heteronormative feminine wiles such as flirting and sexual innuendo to attempt to make progress in the game by bonding with higher ranked males. This kind of behaviour is extremely irritating to experienced female players because it undercuts the idea that females can and should gain status by earning it, the same way males do. Thus a “starfucker” is a female avatar who is sexually manipulative. Lehtonen states that senior high-ranking female players do make a point of identifying such players and removing them from the gamespace:

It's very important for us that people who join are guild centric. The more stable females in the guild (as we tend to style ourselves) feel that we are this way. Most of us are quite good at weeding out the good and the bad females. Honestly, it's often not that hard to tell if you have your eyes open. I do admit to thinking that one of the "stable" females in our guild (we have 12 girls now), does sometimes go a bit overboard in her hate.

But as it requires 4-5 'no' votes to remove a potential recruit it will require more effort than one angry female. We have had 4 new girls join us in the last 3 months - all of whom we had zero issues with. So, either a) girls are getting that they don't need to turn catty to join or b) we have just been lucky. But considering the relatively low amount of females who are interested in high-end raiding guilds (rather than just social guilds), I think our 1 female for about every 5 males is pretty good (Lehtonen, 2007).

Changing the Paradigm

Claude Steele developed the term “stereotype threat” to describe the experience of members of a minority group within the context of a majority group. His studies have demonstrated that dominant stereotypes about minorities will affect performance in certain group situations. When a group of male and female math students were told that they were taking a test to measure whether males are better at math than females, females performed poorly. When the test was administered without the stated expectation that it would confirm a stereotype, female performance was equivalent to male (Spencer *et al.*, 1999). Elite female gamers playing a complex digital shooting game such as Counter-

Strike against almost exclusively male opponents are clearly operating in a situation of stereotype threat. They are not just playing the game (as all the other participants are), they are concurrently disproving a number of stereotypes about females and aggressivity, technology and willingness to challenge males. The group of women in team All 4 One has achieved great success despite these other demands on their attention, but the hostility towards other women players that Vesterby found might have something to do with operating under these circumstances. Steele has suggested strategies of “wise schooling” to counteract the effects of stereotype threat in academic environments (Steele, 1997). These strategies include changing attitudes and increasing numbers.

The ability of minority populations to succeed in an environment from which they were previously excluded appears to be related to percentages. It appears that once a certain numeric threshold has been crossed, members of the minority population are less likely to feel the effects of stereotype threat. A study that sought to determine why there remain so few women at high levels of Fortune 500 companies found that once a critical mass of three women are on the board of a company, other participants stop viewing their gender as the reason for why they made recommendations (Kramer *et al.*, 2006).

Policy implications

This paper suggests that one of the factors that dissuades females from engaging in complex digital play is the likelihood of cross gender competition. Some women relish the opportunity to compete against males and these women probably account for the small but committed percentage that currently own consoles, attend LAN tournaments, and participate in national and international competitions. There are currently several

women, such as Michelle Wie in golf, modeling this behavior in non-digital sports despite a clear perception that taboos are being broken.

My goal is definitely to make the cut and to compete out here," she said of the PGA Tour. She added: "I don't think that there's actually real strict guidelines how to do it. I think that what I'm doing might be right, might be wrong, but it's what I want to do right now and it makes me happy, so I intend to keep on doing it. (Hack, 2006)

Digital game worlds are more flexible and easily altered than the rules of entry at the Augusta National Golf Club.⁸ If game designers are aware of issues related to cross-gender play, they can be relatively easily addressed. Additionally, schools and other institutions hoping to attract women to technology might consider the following suggestions.

- 1) **Normalize cross gender play and competition by making it frequent, routine and pleasurable.** In game worlds, this can be accomplished by having many more female characters present in game narratives and by having them engage with player avatars across a wide range of activities. Stereotype threat can be countered by increasing the number of the members of a minority population present in the majority population and by providing numerous examples of characters which counter stereotypes.
- 2) **Create a broad range of non playable female characters and female avatars who have attributes not stereotypically considered “female”.** Certainly popular media will always include traditional, stereotypical representations of women (buxom, blond, thin, passive...). By broadening the range of females depicted, female and male players alike can chose to represent themselves as a variety of types of female (musclled and timid, thin, blond and blood-thirsty, maternal and insanely competitive, etc.).

⁸ An exclusive, highly respected club that does not admit women; it is the site of the annual Masters golf tournament.

3) **Reinforce emerging perceptions of physically strong, competitive, aggressive females as sexually desirable.** Cultural norms that penalize women for challenging men are a potent deterrent. Females (like males) want very much to be attractive to others and are unlikely to engage in behavior that they perceive as minimizing their attractiveness. By consciously creating representations of females who successfully defy existing gender norms, new norms will be developed. Given that both male and female players will play as female avatars, perceptions can be changed across genders.

4) **Increase the number of female players and female avatars in digital games.** Games that have large numbers of female avatars and players, like Second Life and Sims games, for example are potential models for change.

Marliyn Yalom’s book, Birth of the Chess Queen (2004), documents how the game of chess changed over the centuries. When the game was first played, there were no representations of females in the game. The king played next to the vizier on the board just as male heads of state depended on their male advisors. The game of chess was played generally by the ruling classes and reflected and reified the norms of the culture in which it existed. The game was eventually introduced into Europe and was played by the ruling classes there as well. Yalom’s fascinating book details the introduction of the chess queen in conjunction with the rise of female monarchs in Europe. Not only did it become relevant to include a representation of a strong female in the game, but female children in the ruling classes began to play chess. They needed to learn how to wield power through play before they could be expected to do so ‘for keeps.’ If we want females to be equal players in the increasingly technological world that we are currently constructing, we

need to ensure that powerful females are represented inside our games and that females play those games.

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