

Gendered Barriers to Participation in Gaming Culture

Crystle Martin
University of California, Irvine
4010 Humanities Gateway
Irvine, CA 92697
cmartin@hri.uci.edu

Matthew Rafalow
University of California, Irvine
1st line of address
Irvine, CA 92697
mrafalow@hri.uci.edu

ABSTRACT

Existing scholarship on gender in gaming does not well consider social structural factors, instead either psychologizing gender issues or rendering it an insignificant variable altogether [1]. Thus, we aim to build on this literature by focusing our analytical frame on conditions of gaming environments that may spur unequal participation by gender. In this paper, we describe the variety of intersections that can occur between interest, gaming communities, and gender, as well as how these intersections impact womens' ability to interact and access the learning potential of these environments.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

• Games; • Social Issues~Gender and IT • Social issues~Gender in game communities.

Keywords

Gender, Games, Game Communities, *StarCraft 2*, *LittleBigPlanet 2*, Professional Wrestling, Gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

Some argue that women simply do not have interest in playing video games in an effort to explain why there seems to be fewer women playing than men. Others argue that women intentionally stay invisible or decide to stay in women-only spaces, which makes it appear that few women actually play [3]. Women hesitate to call themselves gamers in part because the represented demographic is male; if they make themselves known, they are Women's participation in gaming communities is important because these environments offer considerable infrastructure for learning and peer socialization in the 21st century. Previous research has shown that game communities can aid in the development of information literacy practices, argumentation skills, science reasoning, math, reading, and writing [5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12]. These learning opportunities are readily available in game communities but only to those who participate.

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“seen as oddballs and anomalies” [4].

Barriers to participation vary broadly from community to community. Gender, however, seems to be a more consistent barrier than most, and this barrier prevents many women from being able to take advantage of the learning potential of online games.

In this paper, we present three cases where women actually do play games but are met with varying experiences and conditions that shape the extent to which they are allowed to participate. Studies of gender in video games often overlook larger social structural influences on women's participation in games [4]. When women do play games, studies show they take on different roles along “acceptable” overlaps of femininity and gaming [1,3,4,13]. What research has not explored deeply is what mechanisms underlie women's participation that spur uptake of these categories. We seek to understand developments in gender and gaming. To explore this topic, we examine the way women gamers narrate their own experiences as they navigate norms located in three different gaming communities centered on interest in *StarCraft II*, *LittleBigPlanet 2*, and *The Wrestling Boards*, a professional wrestling fan community's fantasy wrestling federation, *Over the Ropes*. From this we speculate that minor supports for gender inclusion can have major effects on the experience of women in the community.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

A number of academic disciplines study gender in gaming but the primary focus is, by and large, on individual-level mechanisms for women's participation. In other words, these studies typically ask what it is about women that spur their lack of interest in games. Scholarship typically either refuses to consider gender at all or renders it an insignificant variable [1]. Scant work considers that public spaces for gaming are actually male dominated and also constraining for women rather than the existing trend to locate causes in the psychology of womanhood [2]. Thus, we aim to build on this literature by focusing our analytical frame on conditions of gaming environments that may spur unequal participation by gender.

Studies show that in gaming competitions women are nearly always marginalized no matter their ability [2]. For example, at competitive *Halo* events women “risk being labelled as ‘Halo hoes’...mothers at events describe themselves as ‘cheerleaders’, and promotional models become ‘booth babes’—all supportive, subordinate roles” [14]. And among *WoW* players, women who were self-assured, rather than more docile, were at constant risk of being seen by their guilds as “too stuck up” [3]. When women do participate, they find themselves limited to particular “feminine” roles [3], [1]. For example, Women who participate in gaming environments like *World of Warcraft* either keep a low profile, position themselves as less feminine “tomboys” to be more like “one of the boys,” or join female-only groups. These studies suggest that when female gamers do engage with gaming

communities, they are either labeled as subordinators or pariahs and in ways that constrict their own participation. These issues are ongoing like those that have arisen around women's treatment in the game community and as game designers, which have been in the forefront of game media coverage over the last year [b]

Scant research on gaming examines not only gendered social structural constraints but also conditions that mitigate such constraints. James Paul Gee [15,16,17,18] asserts that scholars and designers need pay heed to not simply games in and of themselves (i.e., representation of women in games), but to the scaffolding as part of a "well-designed learning activity system" [16]. This study thus attempts to document the "goals, worldviews, and practices of particular communities" as a starting point to understand whether and why women pursue games in the way they do [19].

3. METHODS

This ethnographic study [20], which is part of a larger study connected by the Connected Learning Research Network, includes two years of interviews and fieldnotes [21] from observations of the *Sackboy Planet*, a *LittleBigPlanet 2* forum for players who play, create, and share their own game design creations; *The Wrestling Boards* forums, a professional wrestling fan forum where participants write wrestling match storylines; and participants in the *StarCraft II* community, where players hone their skills as strategy gamers. 73 interviews were conducted with participants from 15 years old to early 30s. All communities were large majority male participants. Participants who were interviewed responded to a call for interviewees posted on each site. Very few women responded, all respondents self-reported their gender. Of those interviewed, 68 participants were male and 5 were female. Given the overwhelming presence of men of these sites, we decided to only include the voices of female participants, because the predominantly male population creates the larger culture of each site. From each community one or more female participants are shown as exemplars of how women are treated and how their social position operates in the community. Through these narratives, we articulate the various pressure points that differently exist in each community that serve to enable or constrain women's participation.

4. DATA

The data was analyzed using qualitative coding. We applied both a priori and coding schemes as well as identified themes that were emergent. The a priori coding scheme was developed from *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design*, a larger project on gaming and learning from which these cases emerged [8]. Males in all three communities do not address gender directly in the interviews, but the treatment of gender is apparent in online interactions of participants online and the descriptions given by the women of their community. These three communities each approach the inclusion and interaction with females in their communities differently. In this section we will present the data from the most intensive and least gender inclusive community, to a more casual but very passionate and gender friendly community. We are presenting this data using Haraway's idea of "situated knowledges," privileging the point of view of the participant equally to the "objectivity" of the researcher [A].

4.1 StarCraft II

The online and competitive gaming community of *StarCraft II* has created a very expertise driven and ambitious community. The game itself has both a single player and multiplayer game, although the online community is dominated by multiplayer game play. The community requires intense participation and practice in order to be a ranked player, which for many who play is the ultimate goal. The community is heavily male dominated. Gender, as has been mentioned for other competitive game communities [3,14], is very contentious. Making female gender too visible provokes stigma and alienation from others. One interview was conducted with Jane, a ranked player and active member of her online gaming group. She has also helped set up a large *StarCraft II* *Jane*, a community member, explained, "there are a lot of issues with girls nowadays being groupies--possibly sleeping with pro gamers." This echoes the "Halo hoes" as described by Taylor, Jenson, & De Castell [14]. Jane goes on to describe what she and the community view as proper behavior for women in these settings and what roles women can play:

As a girl in the community, I do feel like girls have to negotiate through the Internet in a specific way--you can learn it--it's very easy...you don't mention that you're a girl too much. And if you ever do mention that you're a girl, you mention it in very indirect ways. Maybe you'll have a picture of yourself, but you won't call attention to it...the smarter girls do that...[successful female players] don't say 'Hey guys, I'm a girl'. That's basically a social faux pas in the Internet community, because that labels you as an attention seeker. I guess there are certain social cues that are happening online, that you have to learn as a girl on the Internet, or else you just end up being one of "those girls". One of those attention seekers, and there are some not nice words for those.

Jane explains what she sees as the context:

That's because it was Brood War, so we didn't have the influx of [*StarCraft II*] girls. Back then it was slightly more misogynistic. Since [the team] was a niche community, it had its own subculture.

In [the team], what happened was, there was someone who pretended to be a girl, but wasn't. She gained the trust of a lot of community members and then broke that trust. And because of that one incident, [the team] from then on was slightly hostile toward people who flaunted their gender too much. I think that's a very specific phenomenon to [the team], Brood War days, because of that one girl, that one instance, because the community is so small.

Jane's analysis of the treatment and appropriate action of females, shows that for her it is about fitting into a male world and that females who choose not to follow the rules laid out for them are show offs and deserve the treatment that they receive.

4.2 LittleBigPlanet 2

On *Sackboy Planet*, the biggest online community for *LittleBigPlanet 2* players, women gamers encounter a social environment that supports their participation but also subordinates them as nurturers or, at best, underdogs. While the few women who participated often took on nurturing roles, one player who

stood out from our data was Abby, a well-known and respected level designer. Abby was introduced to the game by her brother, but quickly gained her own notoriety due to her affinity for not only game design but also game artistry. She has a considerable following within the game community due to several game levels that reached acclaim within *Sackboy Planet*. Abby considered herself quite tech savvy, much more tech savvy than most women she knows. She confirmed during interviews that there were very few other women who are gamers on *Sackboy Planet*, let alone level designers, but she saw this as an opportunity rather than a hindrance. Abby reflected that gamer guys treat women much differently than they do other boys, noting that the majority of them think it is really cool when a girl is a gamer. It gives her more attention among them: “It’s fun to win against a bunch of guys in a game (i.e. *Call of Duty*) because at the beginning, they just think ‘Oh she’s a girl, she probably isn’t a real gamer.’” For Abby, the position of woman gamer identity affords an “underdog” effect in a community dominated by male gamers. Whereas among *StarCraft II* players the community positions women gamers as not only abnormal but also stigmatized as attention seekers, on *Sackboy Planet* the assumptions are still marginalized but in more subtle ways. Abby’s reflections reveal a broader assumption located in the culture of the community, that is, that the categories of “woman” and “gamer” are not assumed to be typical and thus operate by normatively positioning women as not as good as male gamers.

4.3 The Wrestling Boards

In the online professional wrestling fan forum community *The Wrestling Boards*, and their fantasy wrestling federation *Over the Ropes* women hold an almost privileged place in the community. There are few female participants on the boards but they are given encouragement and protection. The fan base for the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) is about 35% female [22] and meets similar metrics. A fantasy wrestling federation is a text-based role-playing game where participants create their own wrestlers complete with backstory. Women participate in a variety of roles and are actively engaged in discussions about wrestling. Maria is one of the most active members of *The Wrestling Boards*, and has been both a writer and an editor for the fantasy wrestling federation. She participates regularly, and is part of the writing team, which is the lifeblood of the fantasy wrestling federation. The writers hold a special role in the community, being the ones who craft the matches in the fantasy text-based role-playing game. As a participant, she explained that the community accepts women despite the majority male presence. She specifically sought out *The Wrestling Boards* as a result of gender- and interest-based teasing: “[it] made me go find a community that wouldn’t judge me as a Wrestling fangirl.” Moreover, when gender-related conflicts arise, they are handled quickly. For example, Maria and Lady Sif, another female participant on the board, called out a male member for hitting on them repeatedly. This person was warned and was then banned after continued comments to Maria, Lady Sifas, and other women on the board. The community has within its charter a requirement that participants must not post anything that is “defamatory, abusive, hateful, [or] abusive,” and the community at large adheres to these rules and policies for rule breakers, which creates an open and supportive community for women.

5. CONCLUSION

Although existing work on women in gaming tends to argue that women themselves are responsible for the various subordinate roles they pursue as gamers, we draw on data collected in three gaming communities to illustrate different social structural features of these spaces that differently marginalize women. Through the narratives of women gamers in these separate gaming environments, we reveal the tensions they face as women who do want to pursue gaming. Women on *The Wrestling Boards* are in the minority, but community policies and practices are in place that allows participants to quickly address sexism when it emerges. Women on *Sackboy Planet* typically take on nurturing roles, but those who succeed benefit from an “underdog” effect because they are seen as less than because of their gender. And among *Starcraft II* players, women are constantly faced with claims that they are sluts or attention seekers simply because they want to play games competitively. In these more limiting game spaces, women can be deterred from participation, which creates barriers to great opportunities to learning [5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12]. The roles women embody as gamers, from nurturers to underdog competitors, make “sense” under the constraints that these environments impose upon their entry. We find that only minor structural changes that support women or do not actively discourage their participation, women easily flourish..

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