Chapter 4

Play Preferences and the Gendering of Gaming

ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the gender divide in regards to play styles and game preferences. The chapter considers how gender differences in relation to play and preferences reinforce and perpetuate the view that computer games are a male domain and a predominantly male leisure pursuit. Additionally, the authors discuss what makes women, and girls play differently and in what ways the genders differ and why this might be. The chapter also discusses the view of masculinity as the dominant ideology of play within the game industry, with feminine play viewed as “other,” trivialised and marginalised by the mainstream industry.

INTRODUCTION

Computer gameplay as a specific activity takes place within and forms part of a culture that is not gender neutral. (Dovey & Kenedy, 2006, p. 36)

After discussing the impact of computer games in society and culture it is not surprising to hear that a large proportion of American teenagers play games (Jones, 2003; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008). However the gamer population is by no means restricted to teenagers. According to recent findings by the Entertainment and Software Association the average age of a gamer regardless of gender was 30 in 2012 a reduction from age 37 in 2011 (ESA, 2011a, 2012). In this chapter we want to consider the gender divide with regards to play and preferences, including play styles and game genre preference’s that have been found to differ between the genders. Chapter
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one highlighted the importance of computer
games in the current climate; specifically
in terms of their current economic, cultural
and media impact. This chapter will discuss
the specifics of play and consider how play
styles and preferences can differ; between
the genders. In 2008 the Pew Internet and
American Life Project found that game play
was nearly universal across teens in America
and it could even be suggested that for children
in many countries including America, the UK,
Australia, many parts of Europe and amongst
many Asian countries to not play computer
games is viewed unusual.

According to sociologist John Huizinga
(1955) play is vital and an essential part of
human life. Play in childhood is viewed as a
means for children to understand the social
world (Mead, 1934) and role-playing games
in particular enable children to understand
different roles, gain a sense of empathy
and the viewpoints of others (Kato, 2010).
The growing popularity and importance of
games in our culture makes a discussion of
the gender divide within games a pertinent
and timely issue. As this chapter will discuss,
play including digital play is deeply affected
by the cultural construction of gender. Play
and leisure, like work, are embedded in our
cultures and therefore discussions of play with
regards to the gendered digital divide is an
important area of research and may enable a
deeper understanding of gender and culture.

Computer game consumers are becoming
more diverse especially in the advent of game
consoles such as the Nintendo Wii, Nintendo
DS and Microsoft X Box Kinect which play
more social and interactive games. Women
in particular are increasingly making up the
gamer population and market especially in
terms of the afore mentioned Nintendo con-
soles with recent figures saying that women
represent 51% of Wii users and 53% of DS
users (ESA, 2011b). However, as we will dis-
cuss throughout this chapter, and ultimately
throughout this book, there are a number of
gender differences that exist within games
culture. In general, games are viewed as a
male pursuit and females are less immersed
in the culture of games. Highlighting the im-
portance of games in culture today Jenson and
de Castell (2011) argue that “over a remark-
ably short span of time, digital games have
come to command an increasingly important
role in social communications” (p. 1), and
therefore they suggest, to which we agree,
that it is important for us to find out “how and
under what conditions girls and women play
the way they do, without attributing to that
way of playing in and of itself any enduring
or fixed significance” (Jenson & de Castell,
2011, p. 10). The beginning quote again by
Jenson and de Castell also acknowledges that
computer games have moved on significantly
from the lone socially isolated player image
and are now part of how people communicate;
they are social and allow players to interact
with each other. This aspect will be explored
later in the chapter through a specific look
at MMORPG’s.

Gender differences have been found in
relation to a number of aspects of game play.
For instance, Lucas and Sherry (2004) sur-
veyed 534 young adults and found females
played less frequently, they had less motiva-
tion to play in social situations and females