Chapter 5
Representation, Image, and Identity

ABSTRACT

Throughout this book, the authors have disproved the dominant White, heterosexual, teen gamer image through highlighting current gamer facts and figures, as well as the research and literature in the area. However, despite these facts, figures, and previous research findings, it is apparent that the industry designs games for a White, heterosexual, male audience. Females tend to be underrepresented in games. This chapter looks at how female characters are often missing from games, especially as main characters, and when females are represented in games, they are often secondary characters and stereotypically represented most often in a hyper-sexualised way. This chapter identifies how computer games are designed for a male audience leaving female gamers as “other” within computer games and the wider gaming culture. It Discusses how females are underrepresented in games and the wider gaming culture reinforcing the “otherness” of the female gamer. It Reviews how the industry sexualises and eroticises women, and it considers how this might impact both male and female gamers as well as perpetuate the image that computer games are for boys.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we would like to discuss issues around female representation and sexuality within computer games. Gender has been found to moderate outcomes including; skill (Brown et al, 1997), aggression (Sherry, 2001), game content (Kafi, 1999) and game preference (Sheldon, 2004) as discussed in previous chapters. Despite gender being a predominant issue in games culture the issue of female representation within com-
puter games as sexualized and second class characters is a dominant theory put forward as a reason why many women/girls are not attracted to games as players and ultimately as game developers. The guiding message of this book is that the games industry and games culture should attract more females in all aspects; from consumers to developers as they may potentially influence each other. It was therefore deemed essential to look, in some depth, into the image and representation of women and girls within computer games and computer games culture. This chapter will discuss the literature and previous research in the area of image and representation as well as discuss the implications of these dominant images and representations in terms of the gender divide and the gendering of games.

Computer games have tended to be targeted towards a male audience (Cassel & Jenkins, 1998; Provenzo, 1991). Indeed, it has been suggested that male is the default gender of computer games (Carr, 2005). A dichotomy in relation to gender in computer game characters has been found in numerous research studies. Previous research into female representation within computer games has found that women are in general underrepresented; as both active and playable characters (Ivory, 2006; Dietz, 1998), and these nonessential, passive characters of women also tend to be represented in an overly sexualised way (Dietz, 1998; Taylor, 2003, Graner Ray, 2004). Much of the research on gender and computer games has criticised the representation of women within the computer games, with their hyper sexualised representation of women. This hyper sexualisation takes the form of large breasts, tiny waists and little/scant clothing. Ogletree and Drake (2007) found female characters within games are viewed as more helpless and sexually provocative than male characters and they are less likely to be strong and aggressive. Whereas Hartmann and Klimmt (2006) found that a lack of social interaction, followed by violent content and sex role stereotyping of game characters were the main reasons why German women disliked computer games. It is not just the representation of women and girls within games that sexualise women as Sheri Graner Ray noted. According to Graner Ray (2004) ‘booth babes’ and sexually orientated themes at the numerous professional games gatherings and conferences suggest the industry is for “boys only” (p. 150) (booth babes are scantily clad/sexily dressed females hired to hand out flyers and entice people to individual game stands at games conferences). One reason why women may not be adequately represented within games it is suggested is due to the prevalence of the I-methodology, which posits that designers designing for themselves in game designs (Faulkner & Lie, 2007). According to Faulkner and Lie (2007), designers who are usually young or middle aged men, make what they view as interesting and when designing for girls/women they tend to build on stereotypical females or females they view aesthetically pleasing.

It is generally accepted that females are sexually objectified within games and games culture (e.g., Beasley & Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Heintz-Knowles & Henderson, 2002, as cited in Ivory, 2006). Haninger and Thompson (2004) go as far as suggesting that female representation in computer games also