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The Impact of Nintendo's "For Men" Advertising Campaign on a Potential Female Market

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In 2000 the lead author of this current paper published a paper with Kirsty Horrell entitled 'Girl Gamers and their Relationship with Gaming Culture'. With the exception of Cassell and Jenkins' (1998) coverage of women and the game industry, little was known, at that point, of the boundaries of the female population of game players and their level of engagement with gaming culture. Indeed, at that point academic research was largely confined to, and guided by reference to proactive female movements such as online female clans like Crackwhores, Psycho Men Slayers (PMS) and Girlz of Destruction. Although the presence of these groups represented a significant counterbalance to the demarcation of the First Person Shooter genre as male, such accounts had a tendency to overshadow less political and overt game playing experiences. Prominent contributors to the public face of female gaming soon began to reflect on the limitations associated with their elected representational modes. In an online editorial feature, Vangie 'Aurora' Beal (PMS clan member and creator of www.gamegirlz.com) outlined her dismay at a journalist's insistence on having her brandish a gun for a photo to accompany an interview (Fig. 1). As one of the first depictions of 'a' female gamer, the interview and its accompanying photo failed to dislocate the artificiality of game-play from the reality of the player. The refusal to present Beal in her everyday attire made an assumption that females who play games are somewhat 'different'. As Beal has commented elsewhere: "When I play I don't really think in terms of man/woman, but when I go out and play with the ladies in my clan, I find it is a more "womanly" experience, but it is the social aspect that brings those feelings, not the game and game play itself". The 'real-life Lara' angle taken by the interviewer thus failed to acknowledge the co-existence of feminine traits alongside a player's in-game actions, behaviours, motivations and pleasures. Thus creating a fictionalized stereotype of female gamers comparable to the male-oriented fantasy of the kick-ass female avatar.

Instead, Schott and Horrells' research sought to highlight their awareness of female gamers that did not seek revision to the nature and focus of existing game-play, narratives or characterization. This research gained access to a range of children and adults that, in economic terms, were failing to register as gamers. Nevertheless, these 'small' groups of self-proclaimed gamers gained pleasure from playing the games purchased and owned by male friends, family and partners. Interviews and game-play observations with this sample revealed a spectrum of passivity with regard to their engagement. On the one hand, the females studied showed little desire to invest in game software. On the other hand, their level of interest in gaming was externally determined at a 'casual' level by an alarming variety of male interventions. Some of the examples given by the female sample during interviews included, males withholding support by removing cheats from gaming magazines and controlling access to game hardware and software. At a cultural level, females also revealed

they were perturbed by the male coded spaces of game retailers and the sexist nature of unofficial gaming media.



Fig. 1 – Representing girl gamers

Despite the barriers placed in front of this particular sample, they nevertheless demonstrated an affinity for certain types of games (primarily console based) in which preference was given to third person platform and action adventure games that centred upon creature avatars (e.g. Sonic the Hedgehog, Spyro the Dragon, and Abe from Oddworld). Their game-play (highlighted by the game-play observations) confirmed a great deal more of satisfaction was gained from ‘play’ within interactive game spaces over mastery of game rules. Although a correlation did appear between the partial-access granted by others and the style of game-play that was employed. The broader implications of this research was its account of a more temperate group of gamers that also signified a shift from the search for the quintessential account of ‘the’ female gamer (see also Kerr, 2003).

A Constantly Shifting Landscape

Even during its infancy, the formation and swift development of Game Studies as a critical field of study has always contained a challenge to popular perceptions of the nature of female presence and participation within gaming cultures. With its established infrastructure (in DiGRA) and an active research culture, emergent theoretical frameworks (see Jensen and de Castell, this volume) and research evidence continue to evolve and highlight the diversity, depth and potential of the

games medium. In doing so, successfully challenging what Smith (1999) has called the 'fast food' connotations that typically questioned both the artistic and social value of games. Of note is the work of researchers such as Diane Carr and Tanya Krzywinska who have provided valuable critical readings of horror, sci-fi and fantasy genres. In the production of close textual accounts of games, and with it a new conceptual language for understanding game texts, their work constitutes a 'players' account' rather than feminist readings, informed by hours of engagement. Alongside the evolution of a legitimate and robust academic discipline that compliments and supports professional programs in game development, the advancement of educational and career opportunities in the industry has also enlarged the gaming landscape. Success of one-off events, such as London's Institute of Contemporary Arts' Women in Videogames Seminar, have demonstrated the high degree of interest in these issues and created demand for more regular events, such as annual international conferences (e.g. Women in Games Conference). Other long-term contributions have come from the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), Women in Game Development Committee (WiGDC) who have consistently sought to publicize female careers in the industry, by speaking at youth and industry organizations and coordinating mentor programs.

General attempts to widen educational definitions of key or basic skills have constituted more proactive attempts to redress what is perceived as unbalance in interest and aptitude towards interactive entertainment. It was back in 2003 at the Game Developers Conference that Ken Perlin expressed a need for programming to be conceived as part of a 'universal procedural literacy' that offers a general means of communication and artistic expression. At the time he argued that the game industry was losing females by the age of thirteen. Yet, by the same token they did not stop reading or writing at that age. By widening access and cultural participation Perlin has argued that the nature and content of future games would inevitably diversify, increasing their quality and cultural standing. The call for the permeation of programming languages into general educational programs has also been echoed by Heather Kelley as Chair of the WiGDC, who proclaimed the 'need to create and promote DIY methods of game creation that would allow girls (and women) to experiment with making their own games'. Recent initiatives in Canada and the United Kingdom (see Pelletier, 2005) have attempted to address these issues. For example, The Center for Digital Imaging and Sound in Vancouver offered scholarships to females to enter its game development programs as part of a strategy to achieve innovative and alternative game design.

While the initiatives cited here focus upon educational contexts with the aim of securing greater parity in the long-term. In the short-term, it is important to keep in mind that the social spaces of gaming often continue to be policed by hostile males wishing to defend what they perceive as their territory. It does not take a great deal of effort to unearth on-line accounts provided by females, of harassment experience for being female whilst playing games. Consider the following extracts:

Example 1: "When I was playing The Sims online the guy Sims always wanted to have cyber sex with me. They kept on hitting on me and stuff. It was terrible, one of the reasons I didn't want to keep playing that"

Example 2: "In Ragnarok Online, I played a mage (Sue me, I love magical people.) and I kept getting "Nice azz" comments whenever I sat down since she wasn't fully

clothed. (I didn't realize that until I moved my camera angle) I've had people stalk me across a map ... I've had prostitution offers ... yadda yadda. Since this is all online, it doesn't bother me very much. But most female gamers who get constantly harassed usually change to male characters to avoid it; I can't blame them”.

Example 3: “I've read a lot of harassment stories from female gamers who play XBOX LIVE so I'll probably have to play with a voice mask. ./ Lewd remarks on bathroom walls are one thing, phone sex is another”

The discursive framework of online game spaces illustrate the power that some males still have to manage and control these social spaces and with it the identity of others.

Entry into Game Cultures

There are far more males that game than females, so of course, it's natural that they are going to try to target them (Female Gamer, On-line Posting)

At this point, this paper turns its attention to reporting a research study into the impact of the continued coding of games as male. In doing so, it focuses on an example in the form of the release of the Nintendo Game Boy Advance SP. To place this device in context, Nintendo had long dominated the market for portable gaming, with various versions of the Game Boy device selling more than 120 million units since it was introduced in 1989. With a history of false starts followed by the impact of Satoshi Tajiri and the Pokemon phenomenon, Nintendo held onto the portable gaming market because of its assumed dominance with young game players fostered through its largely child-friendly games. Irrespective of the foundation of its success and longevity George Harrison, vice president of marketing for Nintendo America, has challenged this view by commenting that: "If you look at the Pokemon games, then it looks like Game Boy is a very kid-centred market ... The reality is about 40 percent of Game Boy owners are over the age of 18. There has always been a very healthy adult component." Indeed it is this adult component of its market that the release of the Game Boy Advance SP device attempted to cater to and reinforce. The Game Boy Advance SP attempted to satisfy a market of gadget-loving males. To achieve this, the device arrived with a new look; a flip-top screen, and a body that came in three metallic finishes (silver, black and blue). The SP also included a backlight and a rechargeable lithium battery that offered upwards of 10 hours of continuous game-play. Prior to the release of devices like the Nokia N-Gage (during that period), the Game Boy Advance SP represented a high-end hand-held console that intended to demonstrate that the Game Boy brand had indeed grown up. Indeed, to supplement the new image, mature game content was also included as part of the re-launch strategy. Sixty new games were slotted for release in 2003, including Tomb Raider, Munch's Oddysee, GT Advance 3: Pro Concept, Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance and James Bond Nightfire. The result of Nintendo's stratagem was highly successful with more than 1.1 million units of the SP sold in America less than 10 weeks after its introduction. The new model was selling at a

rate of more than 10 per minute, non-stop, after its launch. In Japan its sales were inching towards those of the Playstation 2.

Marketing the Game Boy Advance SP

The Game Boy's maturation may address the tastes of more discerning consumers, but its failure to impart a more laissez faire approach to all gamers, suggests it remained at preadolescent rather than adulthood. In this new age of gaming legitimacy, in which games are becoming an appreciated art form (Benedetti, 2003) the mature approach taken to the redesign of the Game Boy device failed to extend to its re-branding thus continuing to reinforce its public phallogentric approach. The tongue-in-cheek marketing campaign clearly marked out its intended audience. The biggest-ever print campaign by Nintendo UK ran billboards that carried the "for men" tagline underneath an image of the Game Boy SP (Fig. 2). This was the lead advert in a campaign that also included an image of a young man playing the Game Boy Advance SP whilst in bed next to a young beautiful sleeping woman with the tagline, "the second best thing to do in the dark". In addition to billboards across the country, these adverts ran as two-page spreads in magazine titles including FHM, The Face, Dazed and Confused and Maxim. All specifically targeted to reach the male consumer and leaving females interested in the device questioning their intended relationship to the product.

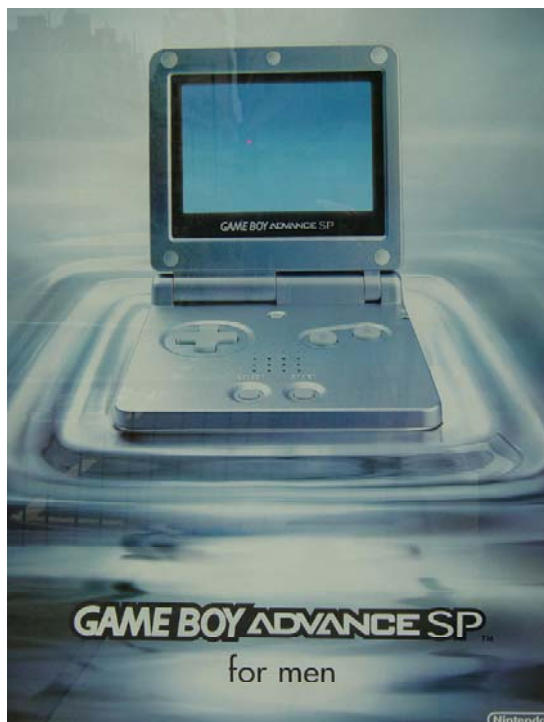


Fig. 2 – Nintendo's lead advert

METHOD

This paper has outlined a select number of advancements in the understanding and recognition of female gamers since Schott and Horrell (2000) first reported on a group of females attracted to gaming but who were excluded from the interdependent relationship between solitary game-play activities and the wider sources of support and consultation integral to progression, development and advancement as a player. When incorporated into the narrative of the advancements made by groups such as the WiGDC, both the timing and the focus of Nintendo's advertising campaign suggested no real change had occurred for females that possess a potential interest in gaming.

In order to examine the impact of an event such as the release of the Game Boy Advance SP groups of females with varying levels of gaming experience were placed into focus-groups where they were asked to discuss a number of issues, including, their general relationship with game cultures, their reaction to Nintendo's hand-held device in comparison to its predecessor and their response to the Nintendo advertising campaign. The group sessions also incorporated individual and networked engagement with the hand-held device, with the game Legend of Zelda, in order to assess the appeal of the device's game-play qualities. The research was conducted in central London and surrounding counties (Hampshire and Surrey) where 1) the advertising campaign was most prominent and 2) the game industry has a strong presence as a future employer (in cities like Guildford, Brighton and London). Two kinds of sessions were initiated, one using tertiary students aged 17-19 years of age, and a second that incorporated networks of friends in their thirties. The rationale for this sampling method was to examine the impact of Nintendo's elected approach to presenting their product upon females at an age that could opt for a career in the game industry and those whose lifestyles matched the intended market for the device – young professionals with significant amount of disposable income and opportunities to play the device during commuting time in and around central London.

FINDINGS

A large number of findings were produced from the focus group sessions. Firstly, as expected, the data collected on females playing habits and preferences offered a somewhat different picture to that presented in 2000. The sample offered a broad range of games as an example of what they were currently playing or had played recently. The persistent durability of game titles such as Tetris, Super Mario, Donkey Kong and Pac Man was still evident in responses across both groups. The retro status assigned to these games today, still guarantees their availability to those who played them the first time around, in addition to securing new audiences. These games were selected for their simplicity, short-time frame and the low levels of commitment required to play them. The inclusion of these titles in the participating samples' responses also revealed how a central component of gaming iconography and aesthetics were part of a shared cultural capital possessed by males and females.

Where responses differed from previous research, was in the variety and broader range of genres referenced in their preferences. Games listed by the participating

sample included: 'God Games' such as Age of Empires and Civilization, a broad range of 'Beat'em Up' and fighting titles including Dead or Alive, Tekken and Soul Calibur, 'Simulations' that ranged from flight, racing to golf; film adaptations and hybrid genres such as Lord of the Rings, Minority Report and Grand Theft Auto.

Consistent with prior research, female participants' in this study demonstrated a degree of flexibility with the gendered nature of game content. One participant argued that: "If you try too much to aim something at women ... the male audience can't play it ... but females can still play male games" (tertiary group). Female participants' were not demanding 'female-oriented' games, but greater consideration by developers within the margins of existing game-play spaces. As another participant put it: "[I don't] necessarily need to have more females [characters] but things that appeal to women more" (tertiary group), referring to a more intuitive interface, greater levels of interactivity in game-environments, alternative goals, pathways and outcomes and transparent character development within game-play.

None of the games referenced were however, owned by the participants, or played on gaming devices that they themselves had purchased. Most gaming experiences described by the sample were social, shared and collaborative. Consistent with previous research, the majority of gaming experiences did not occur within same-sex friendships but with the opposite sex. Further exploration of this issue revealed that the sample found contemporary game consoles such as the Playstation 2 and Xbox 'ugly' and clearly designed for males. On the other hand, with reference to the games available on their mobile phones, these were described as too 'simplistic', 'tedious' and a disruption to their SMS networks of communication. Participants conveyed that there was nothing on offer to them between these two poles.

Response to the Game Boy Advance SP

While discussions took place on general aspects of the samples' gaming experiences, both Game Boy and Game Boy Advance SP devices were present in the room with the participants. While some immediately recognized the Game Boy few were familiar with the Game Boy Advance SP. Response to the old device were generally positive in comparison to the modern consoles available today, but the underlying view across the two groups that the device was largely aimed at young boys. However, when presented with the Advance SP, the response was immediately more enthusiastic and positive.

Although initially positive in their response, the rationale provided for their reaction to the hand-held device did reveal a preoccupation around the issues of concealment and disguise. One participant described the device as a:

... little lap-top that flips up ... I'd prefer to have this one, from the outside it doesn't have any buttons, so you can't see what it is ... I think its nice (tertiary group)

Similarly other participants made the following comments:

movable screen ... people would barely notice it ... people might think, she's like, looking in the mirror ... so you could actually get away with it quite nicely (tertiary group)

almost like a compact mirror (30 something)

Here we see a preoccupation with the culturally coding of gaming as a male endeavour. The underlying theme of these comments is that the device would permit them to 'get away with it'. Such comments were not only informed by the reaction they might receive from playing games in public spaces but also avoidance of being considered 'butch' or a 'tom-boy'.

More positive explanations given for the positive reaction included the perceived high quality of device's usability features. One participant stated that it "doesn't look like a terrifying piece of equipment" (30 something). While another commented that it was "accessible, [pointing to the controls] 'start', 'select'" (tertiary group). This was further confirmed by the participants' engagement with the game *Legend of Zelda* (see Fig. 3), where players became quickly immersed in the game and gained familiarity with the necessary control buttons for the game. So much so, that the intuitive nature of the controls meant it was difficult to distinguish between the regular and irregular game players.



Fig. 3. – Participants from the Tertiary Group Playing Legend of Zelda.

Over a fifteen-minute period, the views of participants, who described their gaming experience as limited and most definitely in the past, were visibly transformed by the

gameplay experience offered by the device. Tables 1 and 2 provide an account of the transition as captured in five-minute blocks:

<p>"I think they're stupid, don't understand what to do"</p> <p>"Its quite hard"</p>
<p>"How do you lift?" "Press R" (2 people respond together)</p> <p>[Excited] "Oh I've found something"</p> <p>"Just throwing bushes, its really funny"</p>
<p>"I love this game so much" "Its well good"</p> <p>[Interviewer] "I'm just going to stop you there"</p> <p>"Oh no"</p>

Table 1 – Extract 1 of a Participant's game-talk whilst playing Legend of Zelda.

<p>"Is that me?" ... "I can walk!"</p> <p>"Ok if I walk on the grass?"</p> <p>"Noise is really annoying me"</p>
<p>"R next to something to lift it"</p> <p>"Oh I'm understanding this now"</p> <p>"This music is really building the tension"</p>
<p>"I've killed my first soldier ... YES!!!"</p> <p>[Interviewer] "Why don't you stop now" [Participant ignores instruction]</p>

Table 2 – Extract 2 of a Participant's game-talk whilst playing Legend of Zelda.

The device itself was perceived as largely gender-neutral rather than gender-related or gender-specific. As a participant commented:

"... doesn't make me think of what it should be. Doesn't invoke what a Game Boy should be ... not a boy toy" (30 something)

Discussion also ensued amongst one of the tertiary groups as to whether males would adopt the new device unless it was clearly delineated male by its label - Game

'Boy'. The common assumption amongst the participating groups was that the device was an explicit attempt on Nintendo's part to encourage and engage the female market. However, this view was soon to be challenged by the presentation of the advertising campaign.

Response to the Advertising

Once participants' views on the device had been clearly expressed and recorded, examples of the Nintendo advertising campaign were revealed to the groups. Symptomatic of the publications in which the advertisements appeared, female participants were largely unaware of the nature of the campaign. The groups were also predictably aggravated by the adverts:

Why can't we have it? Girls should have the opportunity ... the impression to us is that we don't want to be seen with one ... Ads like this is what's doing it, (17 yr old)

If I saw the product I wouldn't be afraid to pick it up ... but if I saw the Ad it might change my mind (17 yr old)

The positive views expressed prior to the disclosure of the adverts, were symptomatic of a de-contextualised introduction to the product. When it was clear that the product had been clearly coded and gendered by the industry, many of the participants appeared to retract their initial perspective. Media advertising presented such a powerful message that it appeared to work against and reverse the group-based experiences that had occurred minutes earlier. Female PR Manager at Sony Europe, Jennie Kong has expressed similar views when she argued that:

Both marketing style and media exposure play a big part in the demographic of gamers as I think female mass-market needs encouragement through seeing other women playing game

An example of a break in the tradition of aiming gaming products directly at a male market was found with the promotion of Sony's Eye-Toy and the use of grandmother Dot Evens for their UK marketing campaign. This strategy representative of the manner in which the "Eye-Toy is definitely going after a wider demographic" (Charu Gupta, Programmer, SCEE). However, this contrasts markedly with another promotion (during the same period) for Dead or Alive: Beach Volleyball that mimics prostitute call cards like those placed in public phone booths in and around central London (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 – Dead or Alive Promotional Material

Participants in the study also broached the issue of 'encouragement', with one declaring that:

If we spent like the same time playing than [BOYS] did, I don't think there is anything built in, in us, that make men better at gaming ... apart from maybe people encourage them more (tertiary group)

Again the extract emphasises the public face of gaming and the defined windows of opportunities in which game-play is experienced by these females.

CONCLUSION

While a sufficient number of support mechanisms now exist that supply sustenance to, and growth for the female gamer movement it would appear that greater changes are still required at the level of industry advertising to foster and enhance further progress in this area. The female gaming community may inhabit a presence both on-line and in educational contexts, but findings showed that media advertising appears to occupy a much greater influence, so much so that it had an ability to dampen the intrigue of potential consumers. Despite the advances being made in this area of gaming culture, the public face of gaming continues to be male-dominated which act to exclude female gamers thus reinforcing the notion that they exhibit little interest in games and game culture. The reality of this study demonstrated that the hand-held device, Game Boy Advance SP, was perceived by a female sample as a gender-neutral design that offered good tactile and aesthetic qualities as well as an intuitive interface. It was the gender-specific advertisement strategy employed by Nintendo that served to undermine their potential endorsement of the product (even

retrospectively). The study observed short sessions of both individual and networked game-play that were adjudged to be enjoyable and immersive for those who participated. Indeed, participants' that were initially sceptical of the childish nature of the game play potential of the hand-held device became quickly captivated by the Zelda game-world, so much so that it became difficult for the researcher to shut the game off and continue the focus-group sessions. The positive nature of participants' response to the device suggested that Nintendo had a viable female market should it chose to act courageously in a modern market to openly encourage, support and foster the female gaming culture rather than repel it.

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