

## Thinking Past Pink: Critical Considerations of Women & Gaming

Much of what has been written about gender and computer games has stayed in the realm of questions of content (do we need "feminine" designs) to the exclusion of more sociologically informed considerations. Some notable exceptions are emerging in which issues of marketing, access, arrangements of domestic space, and the role of social networks are taken as serious factors in understanding women and girls (dis)enfranchisement in computer games and game culture (Kerr, 2003; Bryce & Rutter, 2002; Schott & Horrell, 2000; Schott, 2004; Yates and Littleton, 1999). This panel similarly taps into the social and structural factors at work in analyzing not only questions of *if* women play, but *how* they do and ways they think about and understand their play. Through grounded empirical research across a variety of small studies the presenters will offer a range of explorations on the subject of women and games. From those who don't call themselves gamers but, in fact, play regularly to professional players who compete for money, the presentations in this panel explore how actual women are using and making sense of games in their lives. Several of the presentations will discuss the negotiations women make – both psychologically and socially – as they enter into gamer culture, a space typically seen as only for boys & men. Others explore the hurdles women overcome in playing computer games – ones which are not about content but instead based on factors like access, skill acquirement, and social contexts. As a fruitful comparison point there is also a discussion about how we might look at the women's play outside of computer games (i.e., in the realm of traditional sports) for interesting analytical prompts. Ultimately the goal of this panel is to provide several rich micro-accounts about women who *do* play and how we might better understand the intersection of gender and computer games through their stories. The presentations will be focused on conveying key findings and implications from the research (which has already been completed) and the session will be organized to allow for ample time for Q&A and discussion.

### Gamer trouble – Gender and identity construction: Women who play computer games

Presenter #1

This presentation is about women and negotiating gamer-identity. While the stereotypical notion that mainly boys and men play computer games, this research originates from the assumption that women *do* play computer games but have different conditions as gamers because of dominant understandings of gender and gender roles. If playing computer games is mainly understood to be a male activity then how do female gamers negotiate gender and identity?

My argument is that it is not only a question of physical access to gaming but just as much a question of realizing those structures that keep women from gaming. Gamer identity is determined by the notion of *the* gamer being male. The "real gamer" and the "real woman" are imagined characters that do not fit into the lives of ordinary women. As such, the conception of an archetypical gamer and the concept of an archetypical woman often do not match up. For many women, despite their engagement with computer games an identity as "gamer" is not a preferable category to be placed in. Being female "the right way" is at stake and playing computer games in some cases becomes a tightrope-walk between a desired activity and a desired identity.

Based on my qualitative interviews with eight Danish female gamers aged between twenty-two and thirty, I will present various strategies used to negotiate a gamer identity. Being a gamer for some women equals a tightrope-walk where a masquerade is performed. One strategy amongst others is to say, "I'm a gamer but only in front of my computer." This becomes a strategy of trying to pass within the image of an idealized woman in order *not* to fall into a stigmatized category. As a result, gaming activities are hidden. Another strategy is to distance oneself from what other people think, such as, "I don't care what others say." Even though this group of women are visible as gamers in, for instance, game shops, they do not change the idealized concept of what a woman is and can do. These women already transgress that very image and are placed within *other* categories such as the nerd, the tomboy or the dyke.

*Key take-away point:*

Dominant structures in society determine how gender is perceived and how gender can be performed. As long as gaming is mainly understood as being a male activity, women's access to gaming and an identity as gamer is not easily achieved.

**The secret female player**

Presenter #2

The aim of this presentation is to examine women who, though initially claiming they do not play computer games, do in fact play. I will explore whether or not this group likes the same type of games and also identify common features in their preferred choices. Most significantly, the presentation tries to give some possible reasons why these women do not see themselves as gamers.

The data upon which the report is based consist of two focus group interviews with eight Danish women who denied playing computer games. The group interview included a computer gaming session to see if there were any similarities in their choice of games and an exercise in which they looked at different games covers to determine which layouts they were most attracted to. The study showed that this group of women did not prefer any particular type of game. They played a wide range of games but all favoured those with social elements and showed preference for games without a steep learning curve. They sought out games they already knew from other media, underlining the fact that familiarity was important to them.

The major reason for the fact that the women did not want to be associated with computer games appeared to be related to the reluctance of women to become identified with the masculine culture associated with playing computer games. Other significant factors may be related to the content of most modern computer games, which do tend to have a steep learning curve. The lack of marketing efforts aimed at women as a group, and the initial difficulties women experience when they first start playing computer games are also contributing factors.

*Key take-away point:*

There is a group of women, often invisible at first glance, that do play computer games. These women need to be addressed in specific ways as a market due to the fact that they don't identify with, and indeed are often strongly opposed to, dominant male computer game culture.

**The Professionals: Women who win money playing *Counter-Strike***

Presenter #3

Recent studies of women gamers seem to give the impression that women prefer 'simple' or 'casual' games which do not take up their precious time. Although this may be the case for some female gamers, there are women who enjoy some of the more 'masculine' games on the market, such as *Counter-Strike*. In fact some women chose to play these games professionally. I will be presenting results from my interviews and observations of the professional female *Counter-Strike* clan "Team All for One", the 2004 Electronic Sports World Cup Female *Counter-Strike* Champions. These Danish gamers practice the game four nights a week and attend tournaments where the cash prizes run up to \$10,000.

I hope to be able to give the audience a better understanding of what it means to be a professional female player who plays a game where the gender distribution is roughly 95% male to 5% female. It may come as a surprise that players of "Team All for One" have actively been trying to tone down the fact that they are female because of the harsh tone they otherwise face in the online community. In essence, I will argue that the social barriers and structural challenges women face when playing *Counter-Strike* have much more to do with the culture surrounding the game than the gory graphics and the 'masculine' gaming universe that frames the game itself.

*Key take-away point:*

Women can and will spend both time and effort mastering 'complex' games such as *Counter-Strike*, but they have to tone down the fact that they are women if they want to avoid harassment.

## Sports and games: Sites of resistance to traditional gender roles

Presenter #4

This presentation counters the generalizations often heard about women and computer gaming such as; most women won't play violent games, most women are not invested in playing "complex" games, or that most women "need" games that target "their" interests (in Cassell and Jenkins, 1999). Research by Taylor (2003), Kerr (2003), and the ongoing discourse of "grrl gamers" (Casell and Jenkins, 1999), brings to light the enjoyment that women take from their computer experiences in games that are competitive, status-based and hierarchical, involve mastery, and combat-oriented, along with the additional aspect of the collective community experience (most often seen as "what women want").

The research for this work comes from the author's examination at the barriers women face upon entering the game of *Counter-Strike*, a quick paced multiplayer action war game, within the context of the public, easily accessible and affordable spaces of Danish net cafes. The empirical work utilized participant observation, questionnaires, interviews, and group interviews amongst women and men of varied skill and experience within CS. This presentation will focus on one aspect of the study in which the widespread position of women as "non-gamers" was examined in more depth by studying a group of elite female athletes (basketball) introduction to, and participation in, as newbie's, the gaming space of *Counter-Strike*.

We projected that the similar game-play and surrounding elements of the computer game (team-oriented, competitive, and social as discussed in Stald, 2002) were also elements relevant to the traditional sport, opening the possibility that these women might also be interested in the computer game. Furthermore, we hypothesized that these women were already resisting traditional gender roles by their participation in high-level competitive basketball and for that reason were not likely to be risking a part of their identity by playing a "boy's" computer game. The results revealed that experience (trans-mediated or know-how) and social networks, access and authorization to the games and the technology, and traditional pervasive culturally mediated ways of performing gender, are key "out-of-game" variables that affect the game experience and adoption of computer gaming as a leisure activity.

### *Key take-away point:*

Comparisons between traditional women's sports and computer gaming begins to suggest that the "games for girls" design standard is an insufficient one and instead provokes an orientation more along the lines of "games for fun for everyone."

## References

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