

WOMEN IN GAMES CONFERENCE

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Panel Presentation: "Thinking Past Pink: Critical Considerations of Women and Gaming"

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Moderator: T.L Talyor

"Sports and games – sites of resistance to traditional gender roles"

- Emma Witkowski

What I'll be covering today is a small part of my research that looked at the obstacles that are flanked between the computer game Counter-Strike and females' that are new to gaming.

I'm in no doubt that Tore's articulation of the game of Counter Strike and its surrounding culture has given us an understanding of this activity as one that is commonly understood as "for men". This perception of Counter-Strike and computer gaming is what led me to research this activity with a specific set of female newbies in mind. And this was a group of elite athletes involved in the team sport of basketball.

By using this group I thought I could establish whether or not these individuals, who are already involved in a pastime which is also traditionally understood as something for "the other sex", have an alternate playing experience that could shed new light on the obstacles found between many females and the activity of computer gaming. I'll refer to these two groups from now on as newbies and athlete-newbies.

Now, why Counter-Strike, well, Counter-Strike draws many parallels to several traditional team sports. And I'll give you a little idea of the similarities that are found in both spaces.

- . team-play, Player vs. Player, individual skill development
- . competitive & aggressive
- . strategy & tactics
- . status, hierarchical, fame & financial gains
- . Social, joyful & active flow experience
- . clubs, local, professional & trans-national
- . public, organized spaces

(Stald 2002, Bryce and Rutter - 2002)

Team sports, such as basketball, and games such as Counter-Strike have similar locations and motivations that span over several levels of involvement from unorganized to local club participation and even national representation. Where fame and financial gains might only be found at the professional end of gaming, these fundamental elements are present at all participant levels and are found in both game spaces.

Now my suggestion regarding the athlete's participation in the study was that they might easily slide into an activity, such as Counter Strike, without having to do what Tina has just described as "a tightrope walk" between a gendered identity and a gamer identity. As the athletes are already moving between these spaces in what can be called "risk free" behavior.

Just to give you the context - these two groups were invited to a short gaming session at a suburban net café. Net café's were specifically chosen to emulate the likeness of the traditional team sports situation; they're local, affordable, and they are a social space.

Now if we look at the two group's general experiences before entering the game space – what we see is very like situations.

- None have any recent gaming experience
- There was very little available gaming technology in the domestic space
- None had experienced a local net café
- None that had any female acquaintances that played or talked about playing computer games. However,
- The majority had heard of Counter-Strike
- The majority did have some kind of access to computer games, mostly through their male acquaintances, and
- After playing counter strike, the common remark was that the experience "was fun".

So, on entering a space such as Counter-Strike, do individuals with a history in a comparable activity and space present an alternate reading than those without?

Examples from the "newbies"

[Ass] "... I don't know precisely what it would be that would make me want to go there (a net cafe), but it would be important that my friends would also want to come along and play."

[Joan of Arc] "I might play it again with my boyfriend and his friends for a laugh, but I would probably stop quite quickly, as I would probably die within the first couple of minutes anyway...but I wouldn't pay to play it at a net café."

Before playing, there was already a distinction between the two groups - the newbies refused to play in the space of the net café. The pattern that emerged from this group was that it was not the game itself that was an obstacle, as each participant voiced how much they enjoyed playing; what this group conveyed was that their overall perception of gaming and this game space was focused on who they perceived to be “gamers”, and the perception was that the “gamer identity” was for an “other” kind of person, the nerd or the teenage boy - two images that did not pass into their desired identity.

Although I’ve only included small outtakes of interviews here, there were several distinct obstacles for this group regarding access to playing computer games. Notably it was the out-of-game factors that were the biggest obstacles, where it was a disinterested and unsupportive network who, without first hand knowledge of the activity, stamped gaming as undesirable, which in turn increases the individual risk in continuing to play.

Another prominent issue was the time that would “apparently” be lost on a leisure activity that provided no apparent benefits to the individual or the group, and this was voiced, again, before the activity even took place.

Examples from the “athlete-newbies”

[Big Momma] (after her 1st gaming experience)

“...when I told my workmates that I was going to an internet café to play Counter-Strike with some of my girlfriends they were like (mimics a mouth dropping) “you’re doing what – why are you doing that?”.” ... (“Big Momma” is still gaming)

[Sniper Pan] “they [the experienced male opponents at a net cafe] can’t just think that they will win ... we have to show them that they’ve underestimated us, and we are just going to have to win this thing here. We just didn’t win - ha ha - but we kept trying and trying and trying.”

If we look at the responses from the athlete newbies – we can see an alternate reading which illustrates the overall acceptance of the space and activity. There was no stigmatization of the game, or of the gaming space by this group, nor was there the positioning of themselves as the “second-rate” user.

If we look at the responses, we can gather an understanding of how the athletes negotiated the external factors that are present for many female’s entering gaming. The newbie athlete, “Big Momma”, continues to game despite the off-putting comments of her colleagues and “Sniper Pan”, refuses to be placed automatically as the inferior user - her way of countering this is through her active continued play.

The athlete's show evidence of having an entirely different meaning structure built up around their identity that is much more consistent with gaming, than the newbie group. And what can be heard from the responses was that the athlete group perceived the activity as something that was "for them".

There are three significant areas that differentiate the experiences and meanings read by the two groups, and these refer to; networks, risk taking and know-how.

The athlete group have access to a network that is willing to play, and the gamer identity, as it is understood at the moment, fits seamlessly into and even maintains their desired identity, which means that there is very little risk, if any risk at all, to their association with the activity. This group did not link the game to a specific type of character such as the nerd, nor did they have any reservations about entering the net café space. What they did perceive were the affordances this activity could provide them; a competitive experience which could be enjoyed and created - together.

The combination of these three types of access provides the athlete group with the basics that support their freedom of movement into gendered spaces. By this I mean that these attributes give them access to more spaces, and to new experiences. And most importantly, their movement in these spaces resists the perception of "the gendered activity", where their visibility aids in redefining how the activity and space is understood.

There are trailblazers out there who will play. However, there are also obstacles other than access that keep potential gamer groups away from the activity – and these obstacles revolve around their exposure to the activity. What my research has revealed is that there are various stages and means that contribute in hindering many females entrance to computer gaming: In this study the two areas of access and exposure were found to be central points.

If we were to look back to past accomplishments in increasing female membership in a-typical gendered sports, we could see that an improvement in the two areas of exposure and access have played an important role. As an example, In the USA, the two events of the Women's National team winning the World Cup and the simultaneous launch of the Women's professional league in 1999 suddenly gave women visibility in football, which reportedly helped to boost the general female population's affiliation with the sport.

The exposure of these players and teams, worked to resist this activity the label of being "a man's sport". And it's a bit of a chain reaction where several things are happening: the activity is neutralized as one that is "masculine" by the actual visible presence of role models, there was increased media coverage, there were

professional women's matches, and most importantly, the participation of "everyday women" as social players at local, club levels increased, which creates the need for more teams, and more competitions, where women can use some of their leisure time on an activity with their existing networks.

One of the effects of increased access and exposure could be said to be the shortening or doing away with the gauntlet that often has to be run at the early stages of participation in such spaces traditionally understood as for "men". This enables more people, not just those with a transferable know-how, to enter the activity under less uncertain circumstances.

Now, when I state in my title that these spaces of team sports and computer games such as Counter-Strike are areas of resistance to traditional gender roles, it is not to say that it is unproblematic. Negotiations are made in both sporting and computer gaming cultures, and those who do the negotiating are mostly the female participants.

Harassment, paltry media coverage, substandard financial rewards, the general sexualization of females, and derision of female players and female participation, are only a small handful of negotiations that are endured by females involved in these activities.

However, resistance is always present and it is found in the real and active positions that these individuals play. This very existence of female athletes & computer gamers challenges the assumptions of gendered roles and here's something to remember for those designing computer games out there. Aggressiveness and competition are enjoyed by millions of active sporting women, everyday. There is a female gaming audience out there that isn't currently being targeted.

And just to drive the point home, I'll leave you with the words of one of the newbie athlete's...

"I have a f***** big ass gun - so watch out!" **[Maria the Killer]**

Thank you for your time.

References

Bryce, Jo and Rutter, Jason. "Killing Like a Girl: Gendered Gaming and Girl Gamers' Visibility" in *CGDC Conference Proceedings*, F. Mayra (ed.), Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2002.

Stald, Gitte. "Meeting in the Combat Zone," *Association of Internet Researchers Conference Paper*, 2001.