

#### 4 Becoming a Player: Networks, Structure, and Imagined Futures

T. L. Taylor

Computer games continue to gain attention not only in the popular press but within academic fields of study as well. While a large amount of research has been done on subjects like violence and game communities, one area remains relatively unexplored—the growing world of professional computer gaming. Though Johnathan “Fatal1ty” Wendel, one of the top pro gamers, was recently featured on the popular U.S. television news show *60 Minutes*, many are unaware of the growing number of people competing at a professional level in worldwide events for cash prizes. And, just as strikingly, increasing numbers of people are becoming avid spectators and amateur players within this scene. As researchers, we are especially fortunate when we encounter sites that let us inquire into broader trends and cultural debates. Pro gaming is such a space. As this nascent slice of play (and sports) culture takes shape, one of the most fascinating threads to emerge is tied to our larger cultural and research conversations about gender and games.

As I continue my research on professional gaming, I see recurring debates on gender and play emerge in evocative ways. The community continues to struggle with and debate whether or not men and woman can enjoyably and equitably play together. In the midst of the discussion we are seeing increasing gender segregation of pro players and growing structural stratification including single-sex teams (where there used to be more coed groups), higher prize winnings for male teams, and secondary status for women’s competitions. Against these troubling developments is the simultaneous “glamorization” of women players à la the Ubisoft-sponsored Frag Dolls, the proposed reality-television show based on a Danish women’s clan from the game *CounterStrike*, and the marketing and promotion of (some, and only some) women’s teams.

These trends in pro gaming cannot be understood outside of a broader context and are instructive as a jumping-off point for a bigger discussion about

the place for women and girls in gaming. At the same time that the pro scene is struggling with how to reconcile gender and play, the game industry is now more consistently asking, "What games do women want?" The assumption that there is a single answer (a single "woman") all too easily dovetails in unfortunate ways with the pernicious re-emergence—though maybe it never really abated—of notions of (bio-)gender difference underpinning how we understand play. Witness, for example, the myriad stories about women's aversion to competition or men being better at first-person shooter games due to their "historical" roots as the "hunters of the tribe."

This situation provides the foundation for my growing ambivalence and frustration about how to address gender within this field of scholarship. It is certainly an old and familiar struggle, one that extends far beyond the world of computer games. Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson (1998) argued in response to the 1990s girl games movement that we cannot untangle the production of such games from the very production of gender itself. They wrote:

The question we urge is simply: Whose interests will be served in making use of these purportedly "essential" differences as a basis for creating "girl-friendly" computer-mediated environments? Most importantly, are we producing tools for girls, or are we producing girls themselves by, as Althusser (1984) would put it, "interpellating" the desire to become the girl? By playing with girlish toys, does the girl learn to become the kind of woman she was always already destined to become? (p. 251).

We can fruitfully repurpose their question, turning it back on ourselves who do work on gender and computer games, by asking, "How can we do research and write on the subject in ways that do not a priori essentialize or assume difference through the very construction of our projects, the formulation of our questions, the performance of our ethnographies and interviews? And what does research into gender and computer games look like if *from the outset* it reflectively and progressively confronts and deals with the *always present* production and performance of gender?"

My main concerns now are not only how to do research on gender and computer games but also how to write and tell stories about games that (1)

are more resilient to conservative reappropriation, (2) do not by the fact of dealing with gender seem to assent by implication to problematic difference models, and (3) find methodological tools that upend the easy formulations we often re-create within the research moment itself. To that end, I am particularly interested in research that deals with gender across the life cycle and within a variety of contexts and demographics. There is no single construct of "woman" that we can describe, analyze, capture, and reproduce for the benefit of industry.

I continue also to be drawn to the women who *do* play as a way of better understanding something about game culture. Those who manage to inhabit that space tell us something useful about the paths into play. In this regard I find the work being done on the structural and contextual production of play to be a valuable contribution. And finally, my hope for the future lies in the activist work by a variety of small ongoing initiatives within the gaming scene.

#### Inhabiting Game Culture

The context of and structure around game play matter. Much of the previous research has had an individual-level focus and tried to identify core "feminine" traits (usually framed as a preference for indirect competition, socialization, and/or cooperation). However, a lesson we can learn from looking at women who inhabit game culture is that social networks and access (a category we need to understand in its broadest formulation) are core considerations for play. This is in fact often the case for men as well. Most people come into game culture through their networks and learn to be gamers within specific social contexts. For example, many of the women playing MMO games are introduced to them by a family member [see Taylor (2006) and Yee (this volume)], a friend, or a coworker. We should not overlook the power such introductions provide in both legitimating inhabitation of that space and providing the tools to stay. And we would be remiss in not recognizing that this is also the case for men. This is instructive because it means that paths into game culture are vital. For far too long we have had our eyes on the wrong target. We have looked to play *mechanics* as the explanation for who inhabits this space. But how people come to know about a game, get

reviews of it (formal or informal), get their hands on it, are taught how to play it, and indeed have people to play with is deeply informed by their social networks.

Quite often women gamers are isolated and Web sites such as Womengamers.com show the power that a communal context for play holds. This social isolation may not always be, as it can appear at first glance, because they do not have women friends who play but because they do not *know* their friends play. Far too often we find that women gamers occupy a kind of closeted gamer identity. Holin Lin's work (this volume) on how Taiwanese women negotiate revealing and hiding their game play is powerfully instructive here. Her work also points to the ways the physical and social settings in which play takes place can have a profound effect on one's interaction with games. The configuration of domestic and public space (does one have a space to play in and if not, can one comfortably access public sites), available resources (whose PC or console it is), and women's ongoing social negotiation around their desire to play need to be more centrally considered in our understanding of women as computer gamers (see also Bryce and Rutter 2003; Carr 2005; Kerr 2003; Schott and Horrell 2000). Considering the kind of structural barriers and social isolation women players often face, they actually are one of the most dedicated player demographics around.

This sidelining of women gamers in the general culture has, unfortunately, been mirrored far too often within industry and research communities. The population of women that does play games is frequently seen as an anomaly rather than taken as a prime informant for understanding how play works. Researchers, and people in the game industry, often talk about trying to capture that demographic of nonplaying "*Vogue* readers" to the exclusion of looking at the group that actually seems to be succeeding in inhabiting game culture *now*. At a recent conference on women and games I made this point and was told by an industry representative (one quite sympathetic to women gamers, no less) that current women players were the "low-hanging fruit" and thus didn't warrant our avid attention. But this kind of dismissal is incredibly shortsighted. The industry actively cultivates, indeed courts, their existing male demographic (to the point of ignoring others). Companies understand that part of playing games is being continually, actively, brought into game culture and told you have a rightful place there.

Part of the work of any leisure activity is coming to understand—practically and symbolically—that it is something you can do, that it is not at odds with your sense of self or your social world. The game industry (and, I would argue, the larger game community) knows this at some level and is constantly working to give players information about new games, where to get them, why they are fun, and how to play them. Just as powerfully, it is always mirroring back to boys and men that "this is your and your friends' play space" and "you belong here." Rarely are women gamers given this kind of attention. Indeed, when the game industry does try to make this kind of gesture it is regularly constrained to a slice of "girl games" or the now infamous single title that seems to have been legitimized for women, *The Sims*. If only we might critically untangle the causality loop at work in this game. How much of its popularity with women and girls is due to the way it has been, admirably, proactively shaped as a legitimate object of "feminine" play and leisure? I was struck by this thought while at the mall as I watched parents unhesitatingly usher their little girls to a promotional "child-size" cardboard *Sims* house to try out the newest expansion pack. Stories also abound of women who go into game shops looking for recommendations and are immediately directed to the game. Myriad newspaper articles have been written detailing the girls and women who love and play the game. It is far too easy to co-opt *The Sims'* success into an essentialist story about "dollhouses" and "noncompetitive" play, but we do so at the peril of overlooking the much more complex ways this game is framed, legitimized, and thus adopted.

On the research side, far too often we miss a prime opportunity to understand what it takes to inhabit gamer culture by seeing existing women or girl players as oddities, as if they cannot give us any real insight into the complex vertices of gender and play. Rather than turning our attention in earnest to current women gamers—a group that seems to be "making it"—an ever-illusive category of "girls who don't like computers" is regularly chased after. Of course I do not want to discount the value of researching this group. My intent is not to further render those girls invisible. Certainly we need research on the nonusers and nonplayers. But simultaneously we need to inquire critically about this persistent methodological turn. I would argue that the underlying decentralization of women gamers has at least some foothold in a very specific imagination of what a "real woman" is. For many research

projects there is an a priori assumption about what constitutes core femininity, and current women and girl players often get defined out of projects from the outset. Current women players are regularly seen as anomalies and not of central research interest [see Taylor (2006) for more]. What this means, however, is that we tend to leave their pleasures, their strategies, their networks, their *play* always at the margins. We need to document the long—and strong—history of women players in everything from tabletop games to first-person shooter, multiplayer, and casual games.<sup>1</sup> They tell us a lot about the pleasures of game play and what it takes to get there. And for those interested in creating change, what better place to look than to the women and girls creating it now?

We also need to be much more reflective when we do research in this area to watch for the ways gender is always being produced and what this means to our “findings.” As Caroline Pelletier notes (this volume) on her work with boys and girls, “The way these young people make sense of their experience as gamers is not wholly determined prior to the interview but enacted at particular times to achieve a social purpose within the group, namely to be recognized as gendered beings. The resources they have available in doing this are familiar discourses concerning gender, games and school, as well as their own unequal experiences, marked for example by disparity in levels of access to games” (p. 145). Within the research moment we are always participating in the construction of gendered identities—of ourselves and our participants—which includes formulations about play, enjoyment, competency, and preferences. And these performances are always in dialogue with the much larger cultural and local social conversations we are engaged in as individuals. We need greater reflectivity on this dynamic within our research processes and as we think about our data. Our repertoire of methodological tools should be expanded to include field studies, life cycle analysis, cultural probes, contextual and natural situations, longitudinal work, and multidemographic considerations.

#### Gendered Technologies

Does this mean that there is nothing to be said about the gendered nature of gaming? Absolutely not. While I am sympathetic to many of the early attempts to understand the gendered status of computer games, I think they often

missed the target. Game analysis requires a multilayered approach that looks at a variety of factors and their interrelations to one another. The attempt to categorize *play mechanics* as gendered (versus, for example, the broader context of the game or the technologies that support play) is misguided. We go much further in understanding some women’s reticence toward computer games by situating their hesitations in relation to a particular construction of game culture or specific structural contexts. I mean something quite simple with this. It is not that women do not—or, just as often for those who have not yet had access to it, cannot—enjoy direct competition, power, fast action, or even violence or any of the other content or mechanics qualifiers we typically hear bracketed off as “masculine.” But, in addition to the social network affordances I mention earlier, women also have to face a culture that works hard to keep them out by constructing particular technologies—consoles, graphics cards, software—as “for men” (see Kerr 2003; Schott 2004).

The (painful) irony of “girl games” is that they also serve to reify this very distinction. There is a web of practices, from advertising to reviews to game-store staffing and on and on, that constantly work to construct game artifacts as “not for girls” (or, conversely, mark only certain items as for them). And while a vast number of titles are notable for the way they do not build gender difference into the actual game mechanic (for example, in a game like *World of Warcraft* your character is no less strong if it is a female), art and marketing departments seem woefully behind on curve. I would argue the challenge lies not in trying to identify “feminine” game mechanics but in trying to make sense of the broader context, including the symbolics of the material world, in which games circulate.<sup>2</sup>

Game technologies are constructed within a framework that encompasses all kinds of entertainment and media devices. We can begin to see the widespread success of products like Apple’s iPod or the saturation of mobile phones across genders and the ways game companies are influenced by innovations in product design. Most notable right now is the Nintendo DS Lite, the design of which borrows from a style that will be quite familiar for iBook and iPod owners (of which women certainly are), transforming the handheld game device from a fairly chunky silver brick into a smaller, sleeker device that looks like the playful cousin to the iPod. With such a design turn, products can begin to feel like natural companions to other devices we readily accept into our lives. Technologies, as objects, participate in our larger conversations

about identity and gender and as such, we might consider how gaming devices—from consoles to graphics cards to computers—are always implicated in our discussions about who games and why.

My point here is not that simple changes in product design will suddenly bring women into computer gaming with ease (nor that there is some kind of “feminine” design template). But I do want to argue that play should be thought of as an assemblage in which content is only one component in dialogue with everything from very local social context to marketing, technical competency, and even broader understandings about the role of entertainment devices in our lives. Within this mix, people are always evaluating what play and leisure activities fit their view of themselves. This question of what people can imagine doing or trying is deeply socially informed and we need to pay careful attention to the ways leisure is socially sanctioned and regulated. Methodologically this means we need work on all these aspects and we should simultaneously be resistant to industry pressure to pinpoint a single (essential) factor (often boiled down to a game mechanic) that will capture some mythical “woman gamer.”

#### Activist Interventions: Changing by Playing

In the course of my fieldwork on pro gaming I often find myself at gaming parties and competitions. I have been struck by an emerging scene (at least in Scandinavia) of hands-on activist groups directly involved in reshaping the politics of game culture. Projects like Edu-art ([edu-art.dk](http://edu-art.dk)), SuperMarit ([supermarit.se](http://supermarit.se)), GrrlTech ([grrltech.nu](http://grrltech.nu)), and a variety of others point to the enthusiasm right now for engaging game space by ongoing interventionist projects. I was first alerted to this movement in 2005 when I attended DreamHack, a huge computer game fest in Sweden with more than seven thousand attendees over the course of a weekend. It brought together gamers and computer enthusiasts for a weekend of play, competitions, and demonstrations, and a general party atmosphere. At this event were at least five formal women’s initiatives, which ranged from nonprofit groups like GrrlTech to women’s pro-gaming teams. Their presence was notable (they all had special booths where people could visit for more information) and they were certainly making connections with the growing number of women (and teenage girls) turning up at the event. I am particularly inspired by the work these groups are doing in actively re-

shaping gamer culture through their initiatives and presence and I want to highlight one here.

Edu-art was started by Tina Lybæk and Emma Witkowski in 2005. Graduates of the IT University of Copenhagen, they were interested in taking the critical analysis they had done in their research (Lybæk 2005; Witkowski and Højrup 2004) and creating hands-on projects to effect change. They describe Edu-art as a project development team to “create activities that encourage women and girls to get involved with technology-based pastimes by means of shared experiences with computer games. Our vision is to make women visible as IT-users.” While there is a fairly long history of creating girls’ computer and technology clubs (often with the goal of training them for future use of technology), what I find particularly compelling about their formulation of action is that it focuses not only on building activities for shared experience but also on making women visible in the process. A large part of their work evokes what is sometimes called prefigurative politics—not just critiquing the current state of affairs but imagining and embodying better futures by enacting something different. For example, on International Women’s Day they set up a happening at Fona (see figure 4.1), one of Denmark’s large electronics stores, where they “took over all the gaming consoles and handhelds and took all the time needed to learn the various games functions. We continued to game, swapping the controls over to one another, even though others were watching/waiting for a turn” (Edu-art 2006a). Their work is deeply tied to demystifying play practices, providing embedded social support, and centralizing women as visible active participants. Rather than hiding in the margins, this is work that wants to authorize women as gamers to take up space and their rightful place in play culture.

In addition to this onetime event, they also run ongoing play sessions where they bring groups of women into net cafés and teach them to play computer games. Very important to this work is that quite often these are women who have some pre-existing social connection to one another. What this means is it is not just teaching a woman how to play a game and then sending her off into the private sphere but pulling in existing social networks that become play communities. This is of vital importance and mirrors one of the reasons many men can negotiate game culture—they inhabit it within a social context and derive support through those connections. If we look at the success many women MMO game players have with getting into, and staying in, that



Figure 4.1 Edu-art takeover of Fona for International Women's Day (see color plate).

culture, it is tied to their being brought in by an off-line social connection and then extending their network once in the game.

But the other power of these events—of playing the demos in a store or going to a net café—is that, as I discuss earlier, they perform and make visible an identity typically hidden: woman as gamer. They are hitting on something with the ways this in turn legitimizes that behavior, and that identity, for women. Edu-art sponsors a series called Letz Play, which took their training/play sessions and extended them, culminating in a final competition that took place at Boomtown, one of the largest net cafés in Copenhagen. The goals of that event were to:

- participate in the development of girls' and women's IT skills by playing recreational computer gaming
- make women and girls visible in places where they, for the most, are not represented
- open up a space that provides the opportunity to create new networks outside of educational and family spaces
- give women and girls the opportunity to play with strategy, communication, leadership, and teamwork through recreational IT-based activities
- make net cafés interesting and accessible for women and girls as an alternative space for recreation

Letz Play supports women's and girls' IT-competencies and increases participants' computer confidence. This initiative offers the participants an opportunity that they were not aware they had. (Edu-art 2006b)

In addition to the value these initiatives bring to women wanting to try computer gaming, the symbolic importance, not only to the women themselves but also to the men and boys (and indeed other women) who happen into the space, should not be underestimated. Arriving at the site on the final day of the competition, the visitor saw a team of women DJing at the café entrance while other women played at tables in the main area (see figure 4.2). The other significant contribution initiatives like Edu-art provide go to a deeper methodological critique we need to reflect on as researchers. They are

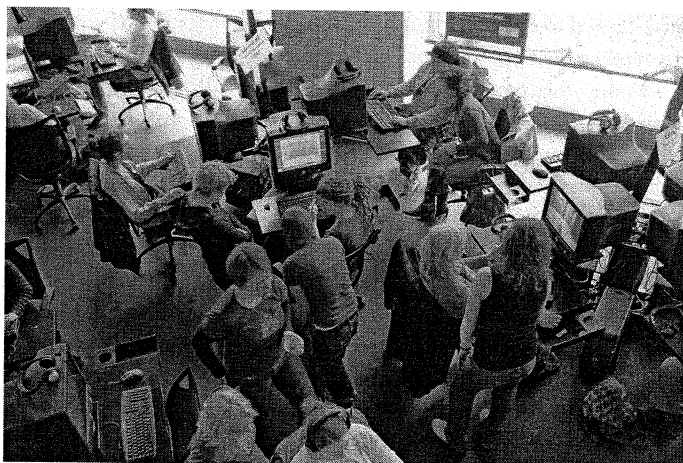


Figure 4.2 Final day of the "Letz Play" event at Boomtown, Copenhagen (see color plate).  
Photo by Emil Oustrup (edofoto.dk).

interested, as they put it, in giving participants "an opportunity that they were not aware they had." This is not minor when it comes to women and computer games. We should consider the ways women (and girls) may not yet know what they would enjoy in gaming and that it is all too easy to foreclose exploration through particular kinds of research questions or methods. For example, Diane Carr (2005) found in her work with a game club for girls that the stated preferences of the girls for particular titles was deeply situated in everything from the layout of the room to the social context in which a game might be played. As Carr notes, the "ability of the girls to recognize and actualize the pleasures promised by different games was enabled by their being literate in the forms of play available, and the kinds of experiences potentially on offer" (p. 376).

It is too often assumed that women who do not buy computer games or choose particular titles are making an informed decision—that is, a negative decision about a game or a play mechanic—rather than one in which they simply have not had the access to experiment and formulate tastes and preferences about genres and types of play. As stated earlier, many women have been given signals (from the broader culture and from the industry itself) that computer games are not meant for them, so it is no surprise that they may not have

any real sense of what is out there or what they might enjoy doing if they had the chance. And far too often researchers misinterpret the behavior or comments common to new players as solely about gender. Knowledge of standard game mechanics, interface practices, and even genre conventions are powerful factors in computer game play and are regularly overlooked by researchers.<sup>3</sup> In fact, what often looks like a "women gamers" problem is very regularly a "newbie" issue. Initiatives like those done by Edu-art are about introducing women to games (and not special "women's" or "girls'" games) and, importantly, giving them the tools—technical, skill, *and* social—to play.

#### Future Studies

There is a strong body of research on gender and computer games that has emerged since the important work *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. This second wave of studies has provided critical pointers to the role that structure and contextual formulations of play can bring to our understanding of the issue. Rather than rely on stereotypical or essentializing stories of gender, we can see how becoming a player takes place through a web of networks, practices, possibilities, and technologies. We might also fruitfully consider how the work of scholars like Mizuko Ito (this volume) and Henry Jenkins (2006)—each of whom map out a much broader "media mix" that weaves together games with movies, animation, written work, and the like—can point to further paths of exploration and expanded understanding of play. Understanding this assemblage and how it relates to gender is the task ahead. This means we also need to be more careful to avoid conflating girls with women or oversimplifying the dynamic construction of gender as performed across the life cycle or within varying social contexts. We need better ways of researching gender, of recognizing that we and our participants are always—even at the very moment of trying to understand it—performing and enacting for one another particular identities that shape our understanding of the playful life.

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great conversation about the issues. I also want to give a special thanks to Emma Witkowski and Tina Lybæk for their continued insights, good humor, and inspiring activity.

#### Notes

1. The work on gender and sports can also be useful in navigating these issues. We can see there the long battle over not simply women playing but about what *kind of play* they should engage in. See, for example, Bolin and Granskog (2003), Cahn (1994), Hargreaves (1994), and Lawler (2002).

2. I find Judith Halberstam's (1998) provocative claim that "at least early on in life, girls should avoid femininity" fairly compelling (p. 269). She argues that the costs that come with "excessive conventional femininity" (such as passivity, inactivity, and "unhealthy body manipulations") should prompt us to consider the positive potential subjectivities like the tomboy hold. While this approach has some resonance with Cornelia Brunner's proposal in this volume, I remain somewhat ambivalent about the rhetorical potential of asking people to suddenly think of themselves as "masculine women" or "feminine men" rather than reconfiguring what we understand as potential identities that men and women, boys and girls, can legitimately inhabit (and term whatever they are most comfortable with). Though I have a great deal of sympathy for the long-term project the language of "female masculinities" evokes, I worry about its practical deployment in the short term versus simply broadening the domain of the "feminine" or "masculine."

3. I eagerly await the study, for example, that finally controls for genre knowledge. How often do we read yet another article showing that women prefer stories or puzzles in computer games without any attention to the fact that these are deep genre conventions that they are well familiar with outside of the digital realm and that that very familiarity may play a strong role in how preference and pleasure gets mapped out?

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