

Writing “Gamers”: The Gendered Construction of Gamer Identity in *Nintendo Power* (1994-1999)

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Abstract

In the mid-1990s, a small group of video game designers attempted to lessen gaming’s gender gap by creating software targeting girls. By 1999, however, these attempts collapsed, and video games remained a masculinized technology. To help understand why this movement failed, this article addresses the unexplored role of consumer press in defining “gamers” as male. A detailed content analysis of *Nintendo Power* issues published from 1994-1999 shows that mainstream companies largely ignored the girls’ games movement, instead targeting male audiences through player representations, sexualized female characters, magazine covers featuring men, and predominantly male authors. Given the mutually constitutive nature of representation and reality, the lack of women in consumer press then affected girls’ ability to identify as gamers and enter the gaming community. This shows that, even as gaming audiences diversify, inclusive *representations* are also needed to redefine “gamer” as more than just “male”.

Keywords: media history, video games, gender, consumer press, critical content analysis

Introduction

Following the success of the Nintendo Wii in the mid-2000s and the subsequent spread of mobile gaming, popular and industry media have paid significant attention to casual games' potential to broaden the video game audience (Mindlin 2006, Kane 2009, "U-Turn" 2012). Played frequently or even primarily by women, casual and mobile offerings break the stereotypical view of games as a masculinized technology primarily consumed by men and boys. Therefore, they are seen as redefining who "gamers" are along more inclusive lines. At the same time as this potential broadening, however, video games have faced a number of sexist incidents in which women have been severely harassed for trying to compete professionally, make games, or even discuss in-game content from a critical cultural perspective (O'Leary 2012, Sarkeesian 2012, Campbell 2014, Edidin 2014, Auerbach 2014). There is a distinct divide between games' expected redefinition and what is actually occurring. This demonstrates that changing the socially constructed gender identity of a medium requires more than just a diverse audience.

After all, there have consistently been women who have enjoyed diverse genres of video games. From Barbie to Mortal Kombat, for instance, describes the 1990s "game grrlz", who "have never felt left out of the digital realm and [who] take pleasure in beating boys at their own games" (Cassell and Jenkins 1998, 328). More recent work has continued to show that women can find many pleasures in both amateur and professional gaming (Bryce and Rutter 2002 and 2003, Taylor 2003, Taylor 2008, Pearce 2009, Taylor et al. 2009, Nardi 2010), even when they confront players or expectations that define games as "for boys". Video games' masculinization cannot simply be seen as a reflection of its players. Rather, masculinization is the result of many different factors.

One potential influence comes from representation, or how gamers are shown in

mediated formats. Even as audiences change, press sources, marketing materials, and other related paraphernalia present games as something for boys and gamers as male (Kirkpatrick 2012, Fisher 2015). When female gamers are discussed, they are often treated as anomalies (Reisinger 2008) or new, exciting markets that are only just being targeted (Kane 2009). This frames women and girls as outsiders to gaming, and men and boys as central components, significantly impacting the medium overall. As scholars like Stuart Hall have recognized, the ways in which a group is represented both draw on and contribute to that group's identity; these characteristics mutually constitute each other (Hall 1996). Therefore, understanding the nature of who can be a "gamer" and how this group is defined requires an understanding of its representation. Changing gaming culture requires changing representations as well as audiences.

To demonstrate how these factors relate, this article examines consumer video game magazines, specifically *Nintendo Power*, published during the girls' games movement (GGM) of the 1990s, a time when some developers explicitly tried to break the medium's historical masculinization. Their efforts were not successful, in part due to their failure to change mainstream media representations of who gamers were. Because the GGM was a clear moment in which video games' gender associations failed to change despite pressures to do so, it can provide insight into elements that need to be different moving forward if games are to become more inclusive. An investigation of 1990s press provides a lens through which to approach the current era of games, in which gamers are once again facing potential redefinition.

Gendering Media

Gender associations are not firm, and numerous media have seen their identities change and flex over time. For instance, some media were originally coded male, and later came to be seen as female or more gender equitable. Ham radio is a commonly referenced example. As Susan

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Douglas writes in Inventing American Broadcasting, popular culture in the early 1900s “celebrated amateur radio as an example of ‘the ambition and really great inventive genius of American boys’” (1987, 59). Radio, and ham radio in particular, was encouraged in official Boy Scout materials as a beneficial activity for the development of youth, and radios were primarily located within the garage or shed, rather than inside the house. But the introduction of the radio to the living room as a form of family entertainment made it more accessible to women and girls, as the home is traditionally a feminine sphere (Spigel 1992, 29). At other moments, technologies have moved from feminization to masculinization, as occurred with computer programming. Early programmers were primarily female and were seen as low-skilled clerical workers (Light 1999), but as computers became more common, a variety of forces helped construct them as a technology for men.

Press sources, such as magazines and newspapers, are one particularly influential factor. With regards to computers, for instance, the press systematically rendered women’s early contributions to programming invisible, by leaving them out entirely or by treating their work as low-skilled labor. As an example, Light (1999) references a *Science* magazine article in which women working on the first general-purpose electronic computer, the Electronic Numerical Integrator And Computer (ENIAC), were not mentioned, despite the fact that the author had personally met them and understood the complexity of their projects. The article even ignored the contributions of Adele Goldstein, a female programmer who “wrote the only manual on the operation of the machine” (Light 1999, 11). This reinforced the public’s understanding of women as filling a temporary labor shortage through mostly clerical work, rather than allowing them to see how women were actually shaping computers. They were not closely linked with the technology itself as users and creators, making their input easy to dismiss.

Other media have been similarly affected. Inventing American Broadcasting provides in-depth examples of how press coverage of the radio helped define “a pattern of ideas and beliefs about how radio should be used and who should control it” (Douglas 1987, xvii). Magazine and newspaper articles describing the radio chose to focus on some facets of the technology, such as its widespread broadcasting ability and significance to national togetherness, rather than on others, such as its popularity as a point-to-point hobby. In this way, they helped shift radio from an amateur endeavor to a corporate broadcasting system and changed it from a masculine technology to be tinkered with to feminized, mainstream entertainment for the home.

Press also influenced social understandings of television. In her iconic book Make Room for TV, Lynn Spigel argues, “Between 1948 and 1955... magazines, advertisements, newspapers, radio, films, and television itself spoke in seemingly endless ways about television’s status as domestic entertainment” (Spigel 1992, 2). For example, she explores the way popular magazines such as *House Beautiful* suggested the purchase of multiple TVs, placed in different rooms, as a way to navigate family tensions over which shows to watch (Spigel 1992, 66-67). This encouraged many common behaviors of today, such as the development of a “play room” for children and teens. Press sources also helped gender a home’s various rooms and TVs, as shown by a GE advertisement in which a mother and daughter are watching a cooking show on a portable TV in the kitchen while men enjoy sports on the living room’s big screen (Spigel 1992, 70).

Drawing on these examples, it is clear that media and technologies are not inherently gendered, but rather socially constructed. Many factors influence understandings of a technology and its audience, such as its affordances and the way in which it is marketed, but press has historically been a key contributor to media’s social construction and gendered identities. For

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many media, gender identities have flexed and changed over time. For video games, however, gender identity has largely been firm and deeply rooted in masculinity.¹ The US games industry arose within male-dominated university and government research facilities, the only places where early computing power was advanced enough to make games, and quickly developed a largely male audience. Furthermore, although early video game systems were marketed as whole family entertainment, the economic crash of the video game industry in the early 1980s forced producers to redefine their products and markets in a more risk-averse fashion (Graner Ray 2004, Williams 2006). This meant narrowing audiences from the whole family to children, and specifically, to male children, as well as relying on proven genres such as fighting games to ensure successful products. With these forces and many others at work, video games were firmly masculinized by the mid-1990s (Kirkpatrick 2012), and the perception of games as “for boys” and gamers as male has lasted until the present day.

The Girls’ Games Movement

Interestingly, games have failed to change in spite of specific efforts to make them more gender equitable. Perhaps the most well-known of these, the GGM, occurred in the mid to late 1990s. The GGM was a combined effort of industry members and feminist activists. The former wanted a broader market to sell to, while the latter wanted to ensure that girls got the same benefits from games that male players were getting (Cassell and Jenkins 1998). Some even shared both these desires. For instance, Nancie Martin, who directed Mattel’s girls’ software development team, helped pioneer the popular *Barbie Fashion Designer* game series in 1996. When asked why she focused on girls, she said both, “to fill a void in the marketplace” (139) and “I can help lead the

¹ The gendering of gaming will be mentioned only briefly here, to maintain focus on the GGM and gamer representations. However, interested parties can see Cassell and Jenkins 1998, Graner Ray 2004, Williams 2006, Burrill 2008, and Dyer-Witheford and dePeuter 2009, among others, for more details about the historical and

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way into the future for this huge mass of girls” (137). Other GGM members founded studios, such as Purple Moon, Girl Games, and Her Interactive, with the joint goals of creating games for girls and succeeding as businesses.

These developer/activists viewed video games as an entryway into broader technological fields, like engineering or computer programming, and the lack of games for girls as a serious problem. While certainly not the only way to become interested in these areas, games provide an entertaining way to gain comfort with technology and how it works. When fewer girls played games than boys, therefore, they were expected to fall behind in terms of access to and skill with technology, affecting their future careers “as technological literacy increasingly becomes a precondition for employment” (Cassell and Jenkins 1998, 11). Uneven use of games was seen as creating power inequalities that influenced far-reaching areas, driving GGM developers to offer girls gaming opportunities.

Developer/activists such as Martin, Purple Moon founder Brenda Laurel, and game designer Sheri Graner Ray researched the pre-existing play patterns girls used toward other toys. They then created software employing these themes in order to target female markets. For instance, Purple Moon research showed that girls enjoyed exploring relationships between individuals. The company drew on this to create their *Rockett* series, which starred a junior high school girl named Rockett and followed her through the adventures and drama of her daily life. Within the games, players encountered a variety of realistic social scenarios and had to guide Rockett through them, facing the consequences of their decisions, both good and bad. In this way, the games offered girls spaces of exploration that fit with their pre-existing interests.

Despite achieving some success with their games, however, Purple Moon closed down in

industrial forces (e.g. risk-averse development patterns, sex-specific marketing, industrial hiring practices) that have constructed and maintained video games’ masculinization.

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1999 (Laurel 1998), along with almost all of its sister companies. A few, like Her Interactive, still exist and continue to make games, but the simultaneous failure of many female-oriented studios meant that the industry saw the GGM itself as flawed. Mainstream game producers then refocused on their stereotypical male market, believing that boys were a lower-risk audience. As game designer Sheri Graner Ray argues,

By the early 2000s, there were very few alternative titles on the market for females. In almost a backlash against the female market, games began to show up that seemed to go out of their way to exclude female players. Titles like *DOA Xtreme Volleyball*, where girls clad in thong-style bikinis bounce, jiggle and giggle their way through games of beach volleyball, appeared on shelves, almost as if to say: ‘See, we *told* you girls didn’t play games (Graner Ray 2004, xv).

Graner Ray felt that the gaming industry actually increased their attention to male audiences following the failure of the GGM, rather than broadening as developer/activists had hoped. The question, of course, is why.

There have been numerous suggestions as to why the GGM failed, and it likely was due to a combination of factors. For instance, it has been attributed in part to the predominance of men within the video game industry, where they hold eighty to ninety percent of jobs, particularly within creative positions (Reisinger 2008, Huntemann 2010). Because of this, the characteristics designers tend to include in games are characteristics preferred by men, their own demographic. GGM activists also could not agree on the best way to draw girls into gaming and technology. Some, like Laurel, felt making games based on conventionally female themes like inter-personal drama was a necessary step in bringing girls to technology, meeting them in a space where they were already comfortable. Others believed this damaged gender relations by

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perpetuating traditional stereotypes (Laurel 1998). They preferred instead to draw on third-wave feminism and riot grrl culture to update gaming while undermining heteronormative assumptions about gender (Dyer-Witthford and dePeuter 2009). These activists, for instance, modified traditionally masculine games to include female avatars or created female-friendly gaming groups, carving out space for women within existing gaming spheres. Although both sides wanted to get girls into technology, deep disagreements about the best way to do this split GGM resources between two separate groups, potentially decreasing each side's ability to craft real change. It is even possible that the GGM was just a general casualty of the overall decline in CD-ROM game sales at the end of the 1990s (Laurel 1998), as most girls' games companies were PC-based.

One factor that has not been addressed in the past, however, is the way in which mainstream video games companies marginalized the GGM. By analyzing the images and gendered portrayals used in consumer video game publications during the GGM, it is possible to see who these magazines targeted and whether they addressed the gender inequalities that drove the GGM by increasing their attention to girls. Analysis of *Nintendo Power* issues released between January 1994 and December 1999, covering the period of the movement, shows that Nintendo largely continued targeting male audiences over female ones, limiting overt expressions of femininity to specific areas of the magazine and ensuring that male players and characters received far more attention than female ones. By imagining gamers almost exclusively in male terms, consumer press made it difficult for girls to identify as players and make games a key component in their identity, undermining efforts to broaden the gaming community.

Why Nintendo Power?

When researching the role of press representations in gendering a medium, there are a variety of

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sources that could be examined. Due to the desire to see how mainstream developers were defining gamers during the GGM, it made sense to focus this piece specifically on materials created for audiences, to demonstrate who game companies imagined as a likely player. Because of this, consumer magazines provide a logical starting point. If producers outside the GGM itself also desired to reach girls, their publications should display a focus on both boys and girls as potential audiences. Furthermore, although the GGM produced mostly PC games, a significant portion of game sales in the 1990s actually took place on video game consoles, stand-alone systems used for the sole purpose of playing games (Cassell and Jenkins 1998, 7). Therefore, if the concerns of the GGM gained traction with the overall video game industry, change should occur in console-based publications as well as in PC-based ones.

The choice to use *Nintendo Power* specifically came from a preliminary examination of publications in which it appeared less obviously biased toward a male audience than some of its contemporaries. Furthermore, many Nintendo games display characteristics traditionally thought to target both genders. While Nintendo games do not escape concerns about character representations and sexualization (Provenzo 1991, Dietz 1998, Beasley and Standley 2002), many of them, such as *Donkey Kong* or *Super Mario*, take place in bright, cartoon worlds that appeal to girls as well as boys (Cassell and Jenkins 1998, 8). And even though the GGM had failed by the end of the 1990s, Nintendo introduced the option to play as either a male or female character in their popular *Pokemon* series in the early 2000s, showing attention to a gender-diverse audience. Therefore, it seems likely that if any of the major game companies of the time were to recognize the importance of the GGM, it would be Nintendo, which already displayed slightly more equality in terms of its targeting. A lack of attention to women and girls in this magazine, however, would show that the mainstream gaming industry as a whole was likely not

paying attention to female audiences.

Methods

In order to see how *Nintendo Power* imagined audiences and gamers during the GGM, this study examined the seventy-two issues published from 1994 to 1999, the period of the movement. Due to limited time and funds, only one coder examined each issue, and reliability assessments for the study cannot be calculated. The coder examined each magazine on a page-by-page basis, paying particular attention to images, fan sections, and authorship. Specifically, the study took measurements on the frequency of female vs. male players' appearances, the sexualization of players and characters, the types of games and representations featured on the magazine cover, and the gender of article authors and fan contributions to the magazine.

Because this is a historical study, its analysis is framed within the context of the 1990s. At this time, much of the research being done on gender and play focused on majorities— what *most* girls or what *most* boys were likely to do or to prefer. This research then argued that boys and girls tended to look for fundamentally different things in their entertainment (Laurel 1998, Schott and Horrell 2000, Graner Ray 2004). For example, Martin described “play patterns” Mattel noted during their software research, stating, “Girls are willing to share a mouse. They will take ‘Fashion Designer’ and they will say, ‘OK, you try. You put the color on now’... They’ll pass it back and forth. Boys won’t do that, for instance. Boys are head-to-head” (141). Girls tended towards play that was cooperative rather than competitive and that contained options for negotiation rather than requiring conflict-based solutions to problems. Further differences appeared during an experiment in which researchers asked children to design games. Game developer Sheri Graner Ray (2004) wrote, “The boys’ games were distinctly goal-oriented. They focused on ‘getting something,’ such as a lost or stolen item to be retrieved

through a hunt or an exploration adventure... In contrast, the girls' games were activity based. The object of the game was the activity itself" (pp. 7-8). Girls also preferred games that were intuitive to learn or guided the player more clearly at the beginning, allowing them to develop an overall strategy for play.

Although many researchers recognized that there are boys and girls who violate these expectations, most of their work still talks in terms of majorities, and girl-oriented game designers relied on these divides to guide their software development. This split girls and boys into a binary opposition that overly simplifies gender, especially as more recent research into game play has started to show that many differences originally associated with gender can actually be linked to skill levels and comfort with technology (Jenson et al. 2007, Jenson and de Castell 2011). However, because this is the approach used during the GGM, any reaction on the part of big studios would also likely employ this binary. Efforts to target boys, for instance, may play up the competitive aspects of a game or its violence, while efforts to target girls would likely focus on cooperation and relationship building. Therefore, this study will also rely on this approach, seeing if *Nintendo Power* employs any strategies that target girls' majority play patterns or if they rely primarily on their knowledge of boys.

Player Measures

The simplest means for assessing how *Nintendo Power* sees male and female players as expected members of their audience is to tally how frequently each of these groups appears in the magazine. Therefore, every image of a player was divided first by gender based on appearance, name, or description within a caption or article. Then, in order to provide a more nuanced assessment of who was being shown as a "gamer", each image was also categorized as an active or a passive portrayal in terms of interaction with games. For example, a cartoon drawing of a

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girl playing a Super Nintendo counted as an active, female representation. A boy playing basketball in an ad for an NBA game, however, would count as a passive male portrayal. Although the boy was being *physically* active, he was not engaging directly with video games themselves, and therefore was not an active *player*.

Sexualization Measures

Further information regarding *Nintendo Power's* gendered targeting comes from the number of sexualized or objectified portrayals in the magazine and how these differ across groups. Within the field of game studies, researchers consistently find that male characters greatly outnumber female characters, especially in primary roles. Men are also less frequently sexualized; women are physically exaggerated and clothed in sexy or revealing attire to a much greater extent than men (Dietz 1998, Schott and Horrell 2000, Beasley and Standley 2002, Scharrer 2004, Ivory 2006, Smith 2006, Burgess et. al 2007, Dill and Thill 2007, Jansz and Martis 2007, Miller and Summers 2007, Downs and Smith 2010).

In order to speak to *Nintendo Power's* similarities to or differences from games themselves, this study also took measures of how frequently players and characters were sexualized. Specifically, each image was assessed first in terms of role, with players and game characters tallied separately. They were then subdivided by gender, with only male and female representations considered for further investigation. Animal or humanoid characters were included in analysis if they had a gender. In some cases, this was measured via name, clothing, and appearance; for example, the *Donkey Kong* character Dixie is dressed in a bright pink dress and bears a long blond ponytail. From these cues, it is safe to assume magazine readers would interpret her as female. When gender was unclear from the image alone, the coder examined the associated article and included characters that were defined as male or female in subsequent

analysis.

After dividing by gender, characters and players were assessed as sexualized or non-sexualized, and the total number of sexualized players or characters per issues was tallied. Drawing on previous studies that assessed character objectification, a sexualized portrayal was defined as one meeting any of the following criteria: “being portrayed in a sexy way (e.g., clothing that is open in a sexually suggestive way)... vulgar clothing (e.g., audacious clothing such as a leather dominatrix costume), tight clothing to accentuate body parts, revealing dress and/or being portrayed as simply a part other than a face (e.g., just thighs)” (Burgess et al. 2007, 423). Female characters were also considered sexualized if they had an exaggerated or unrealistic bust, while unrealistically large and exaggerated muscles sexualized male characters. Although some previous studies have compared bust size in women to exaggerated groin size in males, they found that this measure did not apply to any games under analysis (Burgess et al. 2007, 426). Therefore, the use of muscles as a sign of male sexualization provides a more conservative assessment of the magazine’s gendered representations than groin size would by increasing the likelihood that male characters would be sexualized, especially as large muscles are a staple of genres such as fighting games.

Cover Measures

In a magazine or video game, the image featured on the cover garners a significant amount of attention, both as the first thing individuals see and also as a representation of what is contained within the material. Furthermore, non-involved parties can see covers displayed on a newsstand or in a friend’s or sibling’s room. In addition to choosing which particular images to display, the *Nintendo Power* team also has to choose which *games* they want to feature, from among dozens of possible options. These particular choices can say a great deal regarding who they see as their

audience and what they think will appeal to these players.

Cover images were first classified by who they featured—players, characters, or celebrities. These images, some of which portrayed multiple characters or celebrities, were then tallied by gender, with the total number of men and women on each recorded for analysis. Finally, the covers were analyzed in terms of the anticipated gender of the game on display. This is a potentially divisive measure, as evidence is strong that both men and women play multiple types of games (Cassell and Jenkins 1998, Bryce and Rutter 2002 and 2003, Taylor 2003, Jenson et al. 2007, Taylor 2008, Pearce 2009, Taylor et al. 2009, Nardi 2010, Jenson and de Castell 2011). However, as stated earlier, both the GGM itself and much of the research on gendered play styles conducted at the time worked in terms of majorities, dividing boys and girls based on what *most* of the group would prefer. Even though this overly simplifies gender, the featured games in *Nintendo Power* can be sorted according to majority play patterns, as this is likely how Nintendo would have targeted different audiences.

The games advertised on the cover of *Nintendo Power* were categorized as boy-oriented, girl-oriented, or gender-neutral according to the characteristics described by Laurel (1998) and Graner Ray (2004). Overall, the coder considered genre, level of violence, ability for cooperative or competitive play, and the gender of the main characters. Characteristics such as violence or direct physical conflict, for instance, generally indicated that a game was boy-oriented, while relational or cooperative games would be more girl-oriented, especially if they offered a female option for the main character. Those that balanced male and female characteristics were defined as gender-neutral.

Author Measures

The final set of measures tested the extent to which men and women (and boys and girls)

contributed to the magazine. While images of players, characters, and games help show how *Nintendo Power* perceives gamers, their choice of article authors shows who they consider video game “experts”. Trusting an individual to write an accurate article about a game and how it functions requires believing that person is competent enough to complete it in an efficient and comprehensive manner. Each article was scanned for an author, and names and photographs were used to determine the author’s gender. Fan contributions to the magazine indicate how important *Nintendo Power* feels it is to represent both girls and boys among their readers. Artwork and letters to the magazine were assessed for author gender, with letters also measured based on the type of feedback they were providing for the magazine—positive, neutral, or negative.

Content Analysis Results

Images of Players

Within the magazine, male players appear far more frequently than female, both actively engaged with video games and as passive spectators or readers (See Chart 1). In fact, eighty-seven percent of player representations are male. They also appear more consistently; while thirty-three issues have no representations of female players, only three lack male players. These three also lack female players; no *Nintendo Power* issue contains only female representations. This displays an overwhelming categorization of players, and the assumed audience for video games and the magazine, as male.

This skewed representation can significantly impact an individual’s ability to see themselves as a gamer, due to the mutually constitutive nature of representation and reality (Hall 1996). How a group is represented becomes part of the cultural knowledge that people draw on, both consciously and unconsciously, when cultivating their identity. When gamers are only or

primarily shown as male, gamer identity will also necessarily be masculine. This can make it difficult for women to see themselves as part of this group. Even women who do play games frequently may not identify as “gamers” or may feel like outsiders to video game culture (Shaw 2012).

The over-representation of men as compared to women can also influence the overall understanding of what a gaming community should look like and who belongs in it. As Benedict Anderson (2006) argues, given the widespread nature of modern society, communities are unlikely to be based solely on geography. Instead, he presents the idea of imagined communities, in which individuals do not know each other personally but connect through an internal feeling of affinity. This comes from imagining others as engaged in the same activities in which the individuals themselves are involved. Affinity can be due to the material form of a medium. For example, the daily delivery schedule of a newspaper allows readers to envision others enjoying the paper while they are reading it themselves. Imagined communities can also develop via the information and representations included in mediated forms. A *Nintendo Power* reader who sees other children like him or herself pictured there, for instance, would likely feel the affinity that Anderson sees as essential to imagined communities. Children who look at the magazine and do not see others like them may struggle to relate to the wider gaming community.

Both these potential outcomes, individual and group, help disconnect non-male players from gamer identity. Even if they play frequently or consume game related paraphernalia, female players do not fit the image of a “gamer” and are not expected to be part of the gaming community. Because of this disconnect, women may be limited in their power to influence the social construction of games, contributing to a cycle in which games’ status as a masculinized technology works to prevent other types of players from entering the gaming arena, allowing its

gendered nature to perpetuate.

Sexualization

The question of gamer identity also reappears when considering sexualization. In this area, female players fare better; however, female characters encounter the same issues that previous research has recorded. Within *Nintendo Power*, images of players are never sexualized, regardless of whether they are female or male, and sexualized character representations are infrequent overall. Despite their sporadic appearance, however, the statistics for sexualized characters within the magazine closely resemble the results of previous research. From 1994 to 1999, 451 total images are sexualized, with 149 being male and the remaining 302 being female. This means that almost 67% of all sexualized images are female. Furthermore, this ratio is generally consistent across the study. Through this lack of change, it is clear that *Nintendo Power* was not recognizing the concerns of the GGM as it progressed; despite the success of games such as *Barbie Fashion Designer*, Nintendo did not alter the appearance of characters in their magazine in order to target girls more closely.

The sexualization of female characters is problematic for three main reasons. First, it can make it difficult for female players to find characters with whom to identify. Available female options are almost always defined in terms of male, not female, fantasies, being overly busty and scantily clad. This can again contribute to perceptions that women are outsiders in the gaming community and are not the intended audience for games. Furthermore, the objectification of female characters may affect women's self-perceptions. There is a potential for negative body image to occur among female players who are exposed to impossibly sculpted bodies in video games, leading to decreased self-esteem or increased self-monitoring (Jansz and Martis 2007, Miller and Summers 2007, Downs and Smith 2010). Finally, some studies have linked in-game

objectification to increased gender role stereotyping, particularly in terms of cognitive ability. In an experimental study where participants were randomly assigned to play either a sexualized or a non-sexualized female character, both men and women who engaged with the more sexualized condition displayed “less favorable attitudes toward women’s cognitive capabilities” (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009, 820). Because of these potential outcomes, the high proportion of sexualized female characters in *Nintendo Power* serves as further evidence that the magazine was largely unconcerned about female audiences.

Covers

Nintendo Power primarily reserves its cover for images of characters, with sixty-two featuring at least one character. Of the remaining ten, two issues feature products, such as the Nintendo 64 console, while eight feature celebrities. These celebrities are always male and are generally athletes. For example, Ken Griffey Jr. appears on more than one occasion to promote his baseball games.

In total, 104 male characters or celebrities are shown on *Nintendo Power*’s cover, while only seventeen women appear. Of these, the majority feature the female character as a sidekick to the main, male character, or present women as part of a group. For example, the January 1995 issue displays Catwoman in the background of a Gotham City scene behind Batman (Figure 1), while the February 1999 issue shows Princess Peach narrowly avoiding being crushed by Mario in a game of *Mario Party* (Figure 2). Only one cover features a woman alone, and in that case, her identity is fully hidden (Figure 3). This is a standard feature for Samus Aran, the protagonist of the *Metroid* series, and indeed one of the reasons for her fame, as players did not find out she was female until after they had beaten her first game (Harris 2004). However, she is frequently shown within the magazine without her suit or helmet, revealing her feminine appearance.

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Therefore, it seems telling that her one appearance on the cover hides this, emphasizing instead her powerful, somewhat masculine armor. Rather than using this moment to provide a strong role model for girls to identify with, Nintendo hid Samus' gender. This indicates that they were more concerned about maintaining their male audience than about drawing in girls, as boys were expected to dislike playing as female characters.

In terms of gender orientation, forty-one covers feature boy-oriented games, and twenty-nine feature gender-neutral games. Not a single issue is dedicated to a female-oriented game, as classified using the research on gender and genre conducted during the GGM. Although many featured games contain elements of female preferences, none of them include these characteristics as truly integral parts of the game. For instance, *Mario Party* is relatively intuitive, as it emulates the style of board games, but it also puts the player in direct competition with their friends. *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter* both give the option of playing as a female character, but as fighting games, they are heavily based in conflict and violence. Because of these design choices, these games cannot be classified as girl-oriented. They are instead divided between the other two categories based on the number of feminine or masculine characteristics they possess, according to majority play patterns. *Mario Party*, which contains multiple elements highlighted by researchers as "female", can be classified as gender-neutral, but *Street Fighter*'s high levels of violence and competition classify it as boy-oriented, despite its few female avatars.

In order to do the most conservative possible evaluation, many games were classified as gender-neutral that may actually be more male-oriented. For instance, *Super Metroid* is classified as gender-neutral due to its star, Samus Aran, and her fame as one of the first playable female characters. However, *Super Metroid* is a shooting-based action-platform game, traditionally seen as more appealing to boys. Furthermore, Samus is fully hidden behind a suit of armor both in her

appearance on the cover, as mentioned before, and throughout her game, making it difficult to gauge the extent to which her gender may have impacted perceptions of the *Metroid* series.

It is true that Nintendo faces some constraints on the material they can feature on their cover. Many of the games released for their systems are produced externally, rather than by their company, meaning they cannot necessarily control all of the game content. Furthermore, while there are no female-oriented games shown on the cover, there are also no female-oriented games shown at any other point in the issues, making it clear that games for girls just were not being produced for Nintendo systems at this time. This leaves little that *Nintendo Power* could do to showcase female games. However, this absence shows that the influence activists were exerting during the GGM did not extend into the realm of the home console.

Furthermore, even though Nintendo's options were limited to the games being produced for their system, the issues under analysis show some opportunities where the company could have targeted girls without making major changes. Cover images are rarely taken directly from a game, and Nintendo could have easily created marketing materials with cross-gendered appeal. Featuring Samus without her helmet while still emphasizing her armor and built-in arm cannon, for instance, could have both provided girls a female character to identify with and maintained the weaponry and action-oriented poses thought to appeal to boys. *Mario Party* marketers could have given Princess Peach equal stature to Mario, rather than representing her as a minor background character. Small changes such as these would have shown that Nintendo was at least partially recognizing the potential of a female market and of the GGM. The lack of these changes shows little care for any audience other than a traditional male one.

Authors

Official Article Authors

Due to the magazine's structure, it was nearly impossible to get a significant measure of who was writing articles. Only 189 of 2064 total articles have clear authors (See Chart 2). These primarily fall within the "Counselor's Corner", where Nintendo employees answer questions about complicated aspects of games. Because these authors are deliberately shown to be experts, the forty-four articles written by women can be viewed positively, as evidence that women can be as good at games as men. However, even within this section, male authors overwhelm female authors almost three to one. Furthermore, while men occasionally write for other areas of the magazine, particularly when it features sports games, female authors never appear outside of the Counselor's Corner. This is further complicated by the fact that the Counselor's Corner was restructured in September 1996, removing author names and images. After that date, female authors disappeared entirely from the magazine. This meant that female readers lost both their potential role models and their representation as experts.

Letters

Even letters from players, published in the "Player's Pulse" section, are primarily written by men. Eighty-five percent come from male authors, and only ten percent from female authors. The remaining five percent were unclear, as many used Internet screennames or initials rather than full names. In terms of feedback, women were more frequently published with positive things to say than men, with over half of the female letters (57%) commenting positively on the magazine or Nintendo as a company and only forty-three percent of male letters doing so. Boys were given slightly greater leeway in which to be negative or neutral, such as when they provided suggestions for new games that Nintendo could make (See Chart 3).

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One interesting element, however, is that letters are the only place in which the gender questions of the GGM are addressed directly. In October 1995, a female player's letter critiqued common representations of women as "prissy, male-dependent bimbos" and received an "amen" from *Nintendo Power*'s female editor, Gail Tilden. A few issues later, three letters responding to the first are included; while one, written by a male author, cites instances of games in which women are active and powerful, the other two, from both a male and a female reader, laud the original author for speaking the truth. One or two more issues contained letters on this topic, addressing both sides of the argument, before the *Nintendo Power* staff declared that they had received so many letters on the topic, it was time to lay it to rest. Although women's contributions to this section are limited, and the discussion of their problems was curtailed, the fact that they were included in the first place seems to demonstrate that Nintendo was willing to include women in their audience as long as it did not threaten their male core.

Fan Contributions

This can also be seen in the area of player contributions, such as artwork or poems, where women come closest to parity. Female readers contributed about twenty-seven percent of fan materials (See Chart 4). Male contributions make up sixty-seven percent, while unclear authors account for the final seven percent. Women are particularly heavily featured in the "Envelope Art" section of many issues, which showcases drawings players send in on their letters to the magazine.

Although it is positive that girls achieved some form of representation here, the fact that their biggest contributions are in letters to the magazine and fan art plays into associations of women with emotional fandom, rather than technical expertise. Because female participation is so heavily limited to these specific areas, women are placed into a position that is already heavily

feminized: that of a fan (Lewis et al. 1992). While the many facets of fandom have been explored more fully over the past few decades, this area is traditionally seen as based in emotional, rather than rational, connections to texts and people. Beatles fans, for example, are often represented as “the screaming, weeping teen at the airport glimpsing a rock star” (Jenson 1992, 11). As fan artists, female readers are presented as highly, passionately invested in the world of video games, but without necessarily displaying the same skill or power over a game that an active player image portrays. They are fans of gaming rather than gamers, and they tend not to appear as experts, at least in contrast to their male counterparts. This, like their lower representation in player images, affects identity, potentially making it difficult for girls to envision themselves as gamers or part of the gaming community.

Conclusions

After a detailed content analysis, it is clear that *Nintendo Power* addresses women and girls in limited ways. More specifically, the magazine presents female characters in more sexualized ways than male characters, consistently shows male players and characters more frequently than female players or characters, and reserves key parts of the publication for male-oriented games and images while limiting girls’ input primarily to fan sections. The majority of Nintendo’s focus remained on boys as the primary market. Girls were not being targeted as equal members of the gaming community, and they were clearly not who Nintendo was picturing as “gamers”; this identity was firmly masculinized.

In terms of the GGM, the fact that a major consumer publication and a key actor in the construction of gamer identity did not recognize the issues involved in the movement kept it from resonating with the common player. The movement needed recognition from mainstream industry players like Nintendo in order to gain traction. Without this attention, the activists and

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industry members involved in the movement remained tangential to the concerns of the broader gaming community and were unable to craft real change. Furthermore, the fact that publications like *Nintendo Power* consistently represented gamers as male meant that women were still facing many barriers if they wished to take on this identity, despite movements to increase their status in gaming. This likely contributed to the fact that games remained a masculinized technology.

Although the data provided in this article focuses specifically on the 1990s, recent updates demonstrate that game magazines still tend to overrepresent men and underrepresent women. Fisher (2015) performed a content analysis of modern magazines and found that female characters were highly sexualized or treated as ignorable sidekicks. Writers also disparaged female gamers as wives or girlfriends of “real” players, rather than real players themselves, and assumed that they lacked both skill and commitment to gaming. This again puts up a barrier between female players and gamer identities, excluding them from game communities.

This exclusion of women may at first seem unimportant due to video games’ status as an entertainment medium. However, games make up a vital component of popular culture, and their historical masculinization has social impacts beyond simple audience make up. For instance, masculinization has aided in the development of a misogynistic gaming culture. When gamers are expected to be male due to their social construction, non-male entrants are often attacked as intruders, even if they play games frequently and display high levels of skill or knowledge regarding games. For example, video games are connected to a number of recent, highly publicized sexist incidents, such as the harassment of feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian, professional gamer Miranda Pakozdi, and game developer Zoe Quinn. These incidents have culminated in 2014’s “GamerGate”, where an argument ostensibly based around questions of ethics in game journalism has resulted in the extreme harassment of game reviewers, developers,

and scholars.²

In addition to public events, individual players face harassment on a day-to-day basis when playing online games, particularly when they are women. Many online game players engage in trash-talk, where they insult or heckle other players. This can be strategic, as a means for distracting opposing players from their tasks, or it can simply be related to anger at losing or at a teammate for making a mistake. Although trash-talking is often taken as a just a facet of playing games and dismissed as non-serious, it tends towards themes of racism, sexism, and homophobia that can drive away non-traditional gamers (Nakamura 2012). For example, trash-talk often includes threats of rape or sexual assault that can be very disturbing to women, who are socially conditioned to fear rape more than their male counterparts are (Nardi 2010, Salter and Blodgett 2012, Cote 2015). These trends can make the gaming community an unwelcoming space for women and other marginalized groups, preventing them from joining in fully; however, because gaming is seen as a male sphere, women also have little power to change it to be more open.

The exclusionary culture of gaming, which is rooted at least partially in the presentation of gamers as male and gaming as a male sphere, has allowed a subset of popular culture to develop into a bastion of misogyny, and the past few years in particular have seen this result in serious social issues. As gaming progresses, then, changing the construction of players may be beneficial, opening up the gaming community and allowing a more equitable culture to develop. One way to start this process, suggested by the analysis here, would be through more diverse representations of gamers, particularly in mainstream and video game-specific press. For

² For more information on these events see: O'Leary 2012, Sarkeesian 2012, Campbell 2014, Edidin 2014, Auerbach 2014.

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instance, increased representation of women as active players, the decreased sexualization of female characters (or the increased sexualization of male characters), and more attention to women as experts in gaming could all help female players identify more clearly as gamers. These changes would be particularly effective if women were not treated as surprises or new additions to gaming, as these journalistic trends separate them from “real” gamers. Other potential changes could occur in marketing or promotional materials. As mentioned in this piece, the fact that the covers of *Nintendo Power* almost exclusively presented women as secondary characters indicated that they were not as important as male characters. Featuring both men and women side by side could help welcome broader groups of players to the gaming community rather than marking them as outsiders.

Although games and audiences are diversifying, the high incidence of sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination within gaming culture show that traditional stereotypes still work to mark some gamers as more important than others. Clearly, continued efforts are needed to break video games’ historical masculinization and undermine exclusionary practices based on in and out groups. The conclusions drawn here suggest that changing representations of who is or who can be a gamer may be one way for modern day activists to begin this process and normalize women’s presence in gaming. It is true that representational change alone may not be sufficient to open up gaming culture completely; developers, audience members, and others who want to draw in more diverse markets will likely also have to work on content trends, online behavior, in person behavior, and more. But while representation may not be *sufficient*, the lessons learned from the GGM show that it very well may be *necessary*. Without representational change, the very groups that activists are trying to welcome into gaming culture may not be able to see themselves as part of it. With representational change, however, efforts to

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affect content, interpersonal interactions, and more may all have a stronger foundation from which to work. And that, at the very least, can be a good place to start.

Chart 1

Images of Players	Total: 946	Avg. Per Issue
Male (active)	235	3.26
Male (passive)	590	8.19
Female (active)	41	0.57
Female (passive)	80	1.11

Chart 2

Article/Review Authors	2064
Male	145
Female	44
Unclear	1875

Chart 3

Letters to the Magazine	802
Male author (positive feedback)	290
Male Author (neutral or informative feedback)	247
Male Author (Negative feedback)	144
Female author (positive feedback)	47
Female Author (neutral or informative feedback)	23
Female Author (Negative Feedback)	12
Unclear	39

Chart 4

Featured Artwork/Player Contributions	666
Male	446
Female	177
Unclear	43

Appendix 1: Covers with Women as Sidekicks or Part of a Group

Images included in files: Appendix 1a and Appendix 1b



Figure 1:

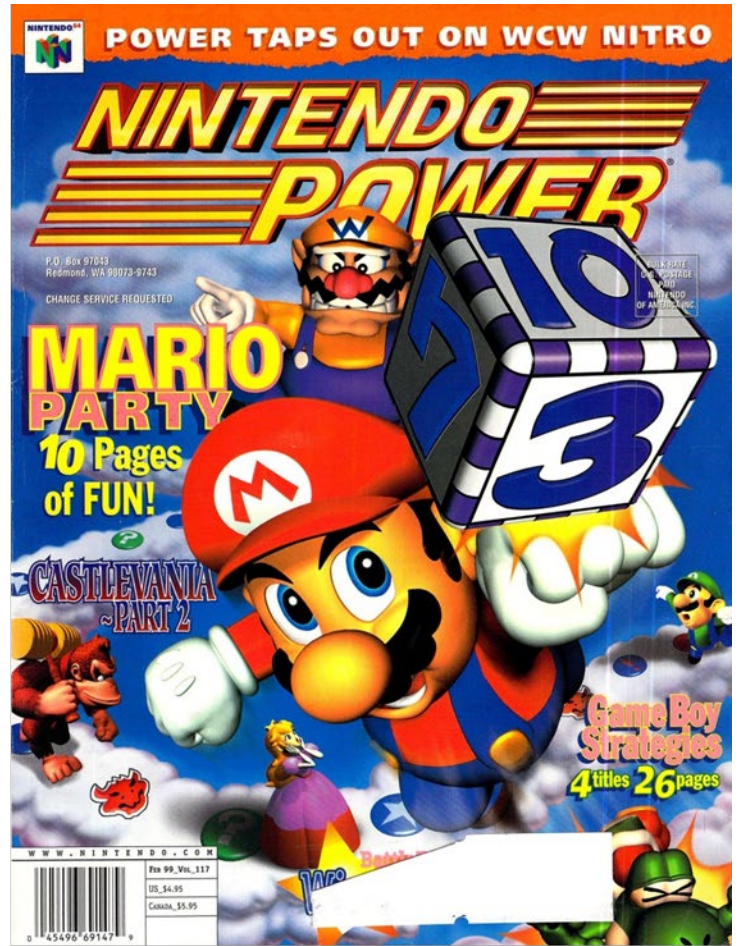


Figure 2:

Appendix 2: Samus Aran's Cover

Image included in file: Appendix 2

Figure 3:



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