

## **Gender in Games and Game Design**

### **By Anuja Parikh**

I went to dinner with a male friend of mine a few days ago, and we got to talking about games. Both of us are avid gamers, but there is almost no intersection in the types of games that we like to play. My favorite game currently is 'Diner Dash 2', while his is 'Gears of War'. Is this gender difference in game preferences coincidence? Perhaps it is, but most probably it is not, as both 'Diner Dash 2' and 'Gears of War' follow the principles of male and female gaming preferences that we learned about in class<sup>1</sup>.

Taking the example of 'Diner Dash 2', in looking at just characters in the game, the main character of 'Diner Dash 2' is a female, while the main character of 'Gears of War' is a male. As most people can identify with their own gender, this dichotomy of characters already seems to separate the two games. In line with female preferences, 'Diner Dash 2' heavily uses emotion in the narrative of the story to help the player feel more attached to the main character of the game. For example, the main story revolves around four restaurant owners who are about to have their businesses shut down by a greedy and rich business man who wants to turn the area into a chain megaplex. The player takes on the role Flo, a waitress, who must help the restaurant owners get more sales, more customers, and eventually beautify their restaurants.

The game is also based upon a real world experience. Just like in real life, the player must do everything a waitress does, such as waiting on tables, seating and dealing with different customer types, serving food, and cleaning up. The happiness meter of the customer encourages nurturing, as unhappy customers means losing business, and ultimately losing the game. Finally, while players must master the game to win, mastery is not taught by force, but through example. The first few levels are easy, and the game slowly teaches the player step by step in how to play. Plenty of visuals are included, and difficulty gradually increases, with each level adding only one new feature.

On the other hand, 'Gears of War' follows many of the preferences men desire. The basic storyline is that the main character, Marcus Fenix, is a prisoner and merciless soldier who is on a rampage to prevent the annihilation of his race from an underground mutant alliance. It is a game full of destruction as well as competition in the multiplayer versus mode. When I asked my friend what drew him to the game, he replied that for him, it "creates an awesome fantasy experience of being more than just a soldier. Instead, the player can fulfill the role of being a modern day berserker." He felt the realism of the brutality and viciousness of the game was a plus and noted that "none of the experience-based subject matter feels watered down". Though I cannot speak for all females, (and of course the preferences are guidelines and not law), I personally find gunning down soldiers unappealing and slightly repulsive. I do prefer a more nurturing environment than one full of destruction.

There is also an immense amount of mastery required to play 'Gears of War. Intrigued by the hype, the startlingly realistic graphics, and the storyline, I decided to sit down and

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<sup>1</sup> Lecture 4, Slide 14. "Gender Preferences" Jan 26, 2007.

give the game a try. Having played very few first-person shooter games, grasping how the controls worked was extremely difficult for me. There were several simultaneous button combinations to move, shoot, and change weapons. I quickly became frustrated that I couldn't control my character well enough to make it to the first level without quickly dying. Because of this, I stopped playing, and never picked up the game since. I later learned that the controls were not intuitive to me because they were designed to work like playing a first-person shooter game using a keyboard and mouse. The bar to play the game was high on the learning curve, and it seemed the best way to memorize the controls would be through trial and error, figuring out which button combinations seemed to work best.

This type of game play reminded me of Ernest Adams' article on game designer personalities<sup>2</sup>. At the start of the article, he wrote that one designer "spoke of the pleasure of spending hours trying to get a precise sequence of button presses correct in order to go somewhere." Adams went on to add, "If you want to know why more women don't play video games, there you have it in a nutshell." After my experience with 'Gears of War', I completely agree with him.

I next questioned that if males and females liked different games, did designers create differently them also? In Ernest Adams' article, "What kind of designer are you", I felt that his description of designers was very one sided, looking at designers who seemed to make games based off of male preferences. For example, the "Competitor" fits well with the competition preference that men like. Similarly, the "Drill Sergeant" and the "Engineer" would probably prefer mastery, while the "Zen Master" and the "Artiste" would seem to like trial and error. The "Gamer" and the "Adolescent's" favorite feature would probably be destruction. In Adams' examples, there were no designers focused on female preferences such as nurturing, emotion, or the real world. I definitely feel like there are designers as well as games that seem to follow the female preferences, and so I decided to add a few more to his list.

*1. The Researcher.* I have read every single paper on what types of games girls like to play. I've conducted hundreds of research studies. I'll just use what I found in my research and incorporate those elements into my game. I know girls will like it, because that's what my findings say. A good example of a game created by this designer is 'Purple Moon'

*2. The Pink-o-nator.* I am a designer that designs just for girls. I will make use of every stereotype I know about girls, and then make it two times more feminine. I will make sure there is lots of pastels, fashion, and pretty things. Boys may like this game, but it is not designed for them in mind. Some examples of games created by this type of designer is 'Barbie.com', or the new 'Disney Fairies' game created by Schell Games.

*3. The Girl-Power Designer.* I will make the main character a girl, and she will always be powerful, strong, smart, and good looking. This girl can kick anyone's

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<sup>2</sup> Adams, Ernest. (2003) "Designer's Notebook: What Kind of Designer Are You?" Gamasutra.

butt. Examples of girls in games created by this type of designer includes Nancy Drew of 'The Nancy Drew Mystery Game Series', Lara Croft of 'Tomb Raider', or Samus Aran of the 'Metroid' Series.

4. *The Businessman (or Businesswoman)*. The game I made was originally was for men, but I want girls to play because it's a great sales tactic. More players equals more money! 'Ultima Online' is a good example of a game made by this sort of designer. While looking at one of the UO (Ultima Online) Forums, a staff writer wrote the following paragraph that well described this type of designer<sup>3</sup>.

"So don't blame the devs for working on new content, and most specifically working on 'pretties' or girly type stuff for the game. There really is a reason they do and a reason why it's important. They know it keeps the game going, and it sells boxes which of course always makes the bean counters happy. It's good for UO and that's what really counts in the end." -- KittyKat, UO Stratics Forum Administrator / Writer

5. *The Maverick*. I am going to make a game with excellent game mechanics, novel game play, and basically create an experience that the world has never seen before. I want this game to be innovative, yet have features that create a broad appeal to everyone. There is really no particular audience in mind, I just want everyone to have fun. This game might be a failure and it might be a huge success, but the field of gaming will never advance unless someone does something about it. Good examples of these types of designers created games such as 'The Sims', 'Okami', or 'Wii Sports'.

I would say as a designer, I am probably a combination of all of these, as well as perhaps a little bit of Ernest's "Dungeon Master". As was mentioned in class, "If you make a game, and no one plays it, who cares?" I believe there is no right or wrong type of designer when designing for females, just as there is no one right game for women... or for that matter or men. The key to a successful game is to have good game design, and to know your audience well.

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<sup>3</sup> KittyKat, UO Stratics Forum Administrator / Writer. "The Girl Factor" Website: <http://uo.stratics.com/news/Editorials.shtml#newsitem1161633116,61840>,