Building a Gamer: Player Preferences and Motivations Across Gender and Genre

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ABSTRACT

Most aspects of life involve gender gaps in terms of entrance, experience, and outcome. Video games have largely not been an exception to this, but more recent studies are finding that factors other than gender may be more powerful as predictors for similarity or difference among players. This study uses interviews with 54 current adult video game players and analyses of online forum discussions to better understand player experiences, motivations, and preferences. Ultimately, players are much more similar than older studies would lead one to believe. The majority of players enter gaming at the same time through similar paths and they identify the same motivating factors consistently in terms of why they play. However, while players note that they are motivated by opportunities to relax, participate in a compelling story, and overcome challenges, female players do diverge from male players in that their idea of relaxation is much less social.

Keywords

gender, preferences, motivations

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to ignore the vast influence that gender has in everyday life. Because of its far-reaching impacts, a great deal of research has tried to explore and explain the social effects of gender. Many of these studies point to a common issue – the gap that exists between men and women across education and occupations in terms of paths of entry, experiences, and outcomes. As a part of these observations, it has frequently been noted that cultural beliefs about gender tend to lead to different socialization for children. This frequently guides them toward specific gendered options (Bradley 2000; Charles & Bradley 2009; Correll 2005; Kane 2006). These outcomes tend to become a kind of circular logic, with results based on different socialization reinforcing the idea for many that gender imparts natural and innate differences in terms of individual interests, demeanor, and skill (Lorber 1995). One seemingly well-established area of gender-based difference stands out in the use and perception of technology. Culturally, participation in tech-heavy careers and leisure – including video games – is associated with men and masculinity (Dickey 2006; Ivory 2006; Kendall 2002; Kimmel 2008; Kuzenkoff & Rose 2012; Salter & Blodgett 2012; Shaw 2014; Taylor 2006; Thornham 2011; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory 2009). This places women who are interested in technology and video games at a disadvantage, frequently causing them to be othered, to have their presence questioned, and to experience hostility in these spaces (Kendall 2002; Kuzenkoff & Rose 2012; Salter & Blodgett 2012).

Although the work on these gaps is extensive, leisure still tends to be overlooked in favor aspects of life that are considered more essential or serious. Despite this, gender gaps in this area can further highlight many causes and consequences of gender disparity and discrimination. Additionally, video games are gaining more attention from academics in terms of gender differences. Increasingly, we

want to know what players are doing. Beyond this, how do they get where they are with their hobby? Understanding players' habits gives us a better idea of the gaming landscape and potential influences of gender on experiences and outcomes.

With this in mind, what do early experiences look like for video game players? What about their later habits? How might these factors contribute to different experiences? Recalling that children are often pushed toward certain interests and types of play and that gender can often influence later choices, this study considers people already playing video games. For these adult players, how much has gender affected their approach to playing video games?

In order to better understand player experiences, motivations, and preferences, this study uses qualitative methods and includes analyses of online forum posts and interviews with video game players. Overall, and somewhat surprisingly, most current adult video game players have very similar paths into the hobby. They start around the same age, with the same games and systems. Additionally, players tend to define their playing time and preferences very similarly. Perhaps the most surprising difference, though, is in the ways that men and women specify these preferences. Going against conventional understandings, male players are more likely to view video games in a distinctly social way.

Getting into the Game

What do we know about how people get started with gaming? Much of our understanding highlights girls' and women's social focus. While it should be noted that most people who play video games appear to enter gaming through their existing relationships with others (Taylor 2006), women are much more likely to enter massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) this way (Taylor 2008; Yee 2008). Additionally, women typically appear to be introduced to gaming as a hobby through a male significant other (Yee 2006, 2008). Quite counterintuitively, though, women who play video games have also been noted to lack a gaming social network, often leaving them more likely to use online forums as a resource (Taylor 2008; Yee 2008).

Gender has been observed as influencing women's access in a variety of ways. For instance, some studies have noted that women have unique time constraints that make them less likely to play video games and, if they do play, less likely to spend as much time as their male counterparts (Hayes 2005; Lucas & Sherry 2004; Taylor 2006; Winn & Heeter 2009). These circumstances may be changing, however. Yee (2008) notes that, at least where MMOs are concerned, women actually spend an equal amount of time on gaming. Additionally, women have been found to spend more time and money on video games and mobile gaming than men (Williams 2014; Williams et al. 2009). As a result, it is difficult to tell what influence gender has and to what extent. Depending on the game genre and platform, it seems that gender has an uneven influence on players.

Preferences and Play

Gender has been noted as having an influence on reasons for playing as well. Early studies suggest that men and boys tend to be driven by a desire for competition and violent content in games, while women are more focused on social aspects of play (Brunner, Bennett, & Honey 1998). However, more recent work suggests that women's reasons for playing video games are more complex, with women wanting to pursue competition and improvement of skill as well (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo 2007; Taylor 2003). When it comes to MMOs, though, players are found to have very little difference in terms of gender and what motivates them to play. Instead, age has more of an influence on whether players focus on competition and gender has little to do with how social players are (Yee 2008).

In this context, it is important to acknowledge that within both gender and broader genre preference, there are shared ideas among players of what they want out of a game and their motivations for pursuing a particular game or genre (Taylor 2006). Despite this, there was historically a tendency in the industry to try to entice female players with "pink" games, which emphasize highly feminized

content (Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun 2008). This started to fall out of favor by 2007, with a shift toward less stringently or obviously gendered marketing and game content, in part due to the growth in discourse on gender as a social construct, rather than an innate biological driver of interests (Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun 2008).

While beliefs about gender are informed by culture, the process of socialization does often result in measurable differences in outcome. There is some support for the idea that boys and girls or men and women do appreciate different aspects of games. Teenage girls, for instance, have been found to look for typically feminine gameplay and, as one example, the game franchise *The Sims* tends to have more female players (Jenkins & Cassell 2008). Further, the casual gaming market tends to be about 70-80% female (Dillon 2006; Jenkins & Cassell 2008). Specific video game genres are also more or less likely to attract female players. Nearly 70% of the audience for both matching games and casual farming simulators is female (Yee 2017). Some game titles also boast different percentages of female players in comparison to overall genre. As one example, women make up about 36% of the audience for MMOs, but are about 23% of the player population for *World of Warcraft* (Yee 2017). There do appear to be mitigating factors in these issues of taste, however, like age and for those who are drawn to similar genres. Considering this, how different are the experiences of players in similar age groups?

DATA AND METHODS

To build on our understanding of what players are *doing*, data was collected using qualitative methods in the form of both direct interviews with video game players and online forum discussions. Because this is a qualitative project, the data will be discussed in broad terms. While there is not a quantitative analysis or component to this study, the use of words like "many" or "most" refers to approximately 60-80% of responses or discussions. In cases where a "majority" or "nearly all players" suggest or discuss something, this refers to approximately 80-100% of responses or discussions. To protect the privacy of both interview respondents and online posters, all people discussed have been given pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted with 54 individuals in total, with 31 being female. Interviewees were able to choose either phone or Skype for the interview to facilitate long-distance conversations and busy schedules. Conversations took between 40 minutes and two-and-a-half hours during August and September of 2016.

Recruitment of interview respondents was done through network sampling and seeking volunteers from online forums focused on video games. These methods were chosen to ensure that participants were well-integrated into gaming communities to better understand any gender differences that might still be present for players with similar habits. Interviewees that were contacted through network sampling were much more responsive and comprise the majority of the sample, with only five recommended individuals declining to participate or dropping from the study. Individuals recruited online were less likely to respond to the call for volunteers and more likely to drop from the study. Ultimately, only four individuals in the sample are from online recruitment. These respondents went on to recommend more players through additional network sampling.

In terms of the locations of interviewees, it is important to note that there are shared online and gaming cultures that tend to be influenced by Western ideals, but are nevertheless shared despite otherwise divergent cultural influences (Salter & Blodgett 2012). Thus, the interview sample was comprised of people living in six countries. Outside of Western contexts, one respondent lived in Brazil, one in South Korea, and two in Japan. In more similar Western countries, three respondents were Australian, four were Canadian, and the bulk of the sample – 39 – was American and lived in western, midwestern, and southern regions of the United States. Respondents were between the ages of 22 and 38 and had varied habits, with players reporting anywhere between zero and 40 typical hours of gameplay per week. Played weekly hours did not vary by gender.

For online forum discussion data, conversations were observed while active between May and July of 2016. Additionally, targeted searches for older discussions were also used for content analysis. Five online forums were observed and searched, with three being focused on female players and two being aimed toward a general audience, rendering them largely focused on male players. These latter forums

were the largest and most active, with one female-centered forum being the third most active, and the other two female-friendly forums being very limited in activity. Because of these disparities, the three more active forums were observed three times per week and the remaining two were adjusted to once per week. In terms of the number of users, the largest general gaming forum had over ten million users, with an approximate average of 11,000 active users at the times of observation. The other general forum had nearly 700,000 users, with an approximate average of 5,000 active participants at the times of observation. The larger female-oriented forum had far fewer participants, with over 35,000 users and an average of 37 active users. One of the less active female-oriented forums, with a specific focus on social justice, did not display currently active users, but had over 6,000 registered users. Finally, the smallest female-oriented forum with an emphasis on humor had over 4,500 users, with an average of only about 10 users actively engaged during the points of observation. While male users do participate in the female-oriented forums and vice versa, forum users are considered in terms of their self-identification of gender in their comments. For all of the forums, the "top" 25 posts based on which were most heavily discussed at the time of viewing were reviewed for data collection. The primary goal of analyzing the forum conversations was to understand the general themes present in discussions among video game players in a context beyond the interview data.

In total, 525 posts were reviewed during live discussion for each of the three larger forums and about 125 each for the smaller forums. Analysis of forum comments were limited to the 100 most highly reader-supported comments. Additionally, targeted searches were added to these live conversation observations to incorporate older forum discussions of terms including: gender, favorite, and preference. For these searches, analysis was limited to the top 25 most popular discussions for each term from the last year of posts. The analysis of forum posts consisted of coding for specific patterns and themes in post title, main post content, and comment content for the most highly user-supported comments in the context of specific posts.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

There is ample evidence for gender's influence on a wide range of interests and experiences, but the support is a bit less well-defined when it comes to contemporary video games. This study reveals many more similarities between people, regardless of their gender, than has been recorded previously. Players have very similar gaming backgrounds and histories and largely similar motivations for play. On this second point, however, there is more disagreement between men and women who play video games, though not where one might expect.

Backgrounds and Histories

For the vast majority of interviewees and forum users, video games are a long-standing part of their lives. While some of the literature suggests a later start for many women, men and women in this sample have very similar starting times and trajectories. Overall, players begin exploring video games between the ages of four and ten. The paths that players take into gaming are also very similar, regardless of gender or preferred genre. At young ages, players are first introduced to video games in the home, typically through consoles that are shared by the family. The most common path into gaming as a hobby among these current adult players is via Nintendo systems, followed by SEGA systems.

Because of the early starting age, players typically recall being introduced through a system purchased by their parents, though some note being introduced through systems owned by extended family. Because of this, video games become an early bonding activity. This is true for the players in terms of both friend and family connections, as video games became an easy way to spend time together and a new means to relate to one another. Most of the respondents discuss fond memories of childhood video game play, often highlighting times when they felt more or less skilled than those they played with.

While parents frequently provide consoles as gifts and sometimes spend time playing with their children, family can also act as a limiting factor in terms of availability. Often, players mention not

having a say in which console they started with or having an option to have more than one console, certain games, or access to certain platforms. Based on interviews, approximately fifteen percent of players encountered difficulties with access to video games in general, while the majority experienced limitations in terms of access to particular games or owning specific consoles. This also extends to being blocked from using their parents' computers to play video games as children. Most of these players found ways around these restrictions and those who lacked general access to video games mention finding alternative ways to seek out specific experiences. For instance, Regina discusses how she sought more video games outside of what her parents provided to her:

> I think the earliest memory of a video game was probably… maybe *Sonic*? [M]y parents never bought me any of them, so when I lived in my grandma's house, [my cousin] had the Nintendo 64 and all of the PlayStations and all the SEGA stuff, so I would just play whatever he had. And then my dad also liked playing PC games, so he liked playing things like *DOOM*, he liked playing things like *Unreal Tournament*, so I really caught on to *Unreal Tournament*.[1]

Although Regina has an uncommon story of not having a video game system of her own, the tendency to expand options through other people's access to video games is frequent. Players mention that, as children, they would find consoles at friends' or extended family's homes to explore video games or systems that were otherwise made unavailable to them, whether it was because their parents wanted to prohibit specific types of games or because having too many games and systems would have been cost prohibitive. These experiences offered additional opportunities for discussing and sharing games in their relationships, giving players more things to talk about and more games to explore together.

But these early experiences are not limited to shared bonding. Many of these video game encounters set the players up for long-term interests and playing habits. The genres that they were interested in or the styles of play that they enjoyed when they were younger can frequently be traced to their current preferences. Even initial interests outside of video games can influence the games that players are drawn to. An example brought up by players repeatedly is an interest in reading. Players who were enthusiastic young readers lean toward story-driven role-playing games (RPGs) or games that contain deeper story elements. This holds true for players who do not describe themselves as specifically seeking story-based play. For those who want to focus more on management and resource allocation in games, their descriptions of what games are good and what games they would recommend highlights this point. As Tanya, a player heavily motivated by economic systems in games, notes in her discussion of her favorite game, "...*Star Ocean* [is] one of my absolute favorite games, I love the storyline, the characters are great… it's a great game." For hobby readers, video games become more important in terms of the story that they have to offer over other aspects like mechanics, even when players describe their playstyles as separate from story. This is shared, regardless of the gender of the respondent.

Although the interview sample has common early experiences, more clearly gendered encounters with video games are shared more often among those on the online forums. While most users of the female-oriented forums had similar experiences to those in the interview sample, male figures are more frequently featured as main components of their introductions to video games. In the larger forum for female players (FF1), brothers are mentioned as being the ones who were given video game systems. Because of this, FF1 users remember having to begin their hobby by using these systems while their brothers were not home. They also noted watching their brothers play or playing together as part of their early experiences. One of the most highly supported comments in one of these discussions states:

> … I loved to watch my brother play video games with his friends. For me, this was a really one of the first ways I bonded with him as siblings….when I was about 12, I was alone at home and wanted to look at a new game that my brother just bought….It was *Final*

Fantasy 10. I started playing the game and before I knew it, 8 hours had passed and I was still playing. Nothing else had ever sucked me in like that. It was to the point where my mom got home from work and I hadn't moved from my spot!
That was when I figured out that games can have an emotional effect on me.

Although this does not figure into the histories of female interview participants, users in the female-oriented forums are more likely to mention male family members as their starting point with video games. In these cases, systems were not bought as a gift for them or for the family to share, but for a specific male sibling. Despite this common response, the second most frequent point of entry discussed on the female-oriented forums is the same as the most common beginning among those interviewed, with parents buying a console for them or for the family as a whole. Forum users also remember bonding through the use of video games and starting with the same systems around the same time, but the gendered story reported in previous studies remains truer for players in these cases.

Overall, current adult players experience similar introductions to video games, around the same time, and with the same types of access, regardless of gender. Despite this departure for forum users, it is possible that specific generations of players share different introductory paths. This is more difficult to assess with the forum users, however, due to the lack of access to personal information, including age. Beyond this, one area where there is a great deal of difference that may be less linked to age and more related to gender is in friend networks. Adding to the confusing information about women and social ties in gaming, social relationships are much more important and prevalent for male players. Men in the interview sample spoke about their friends and how they were a large part of their early gaming experiences.[2] Largely, this seems to have only really impacted female players in terms of their access to people to play multiplayer games with. This is likely part of the reason that women feel averse to multiplayer games later on, as will be discussed below. Still, for the female players who did lack a social network when they were younger, some report being able to create friend networks with other players by high school or college. This is noted by several women in the sample who mentioned feeling somewhat lost in their hobby for a long time, a sentiment not reflected by any of the male players.

Gaming Motivations

While there are many shared experiences among video game players in their early lives, similar paths into gaming do not appear to necessarily predict similar interests and habits. Additionally, genre may be a stronger predictor of player desires than gender. For most players, socializing with others is not a primary point of focus for playing video games, but all of the players interviewed understand their participation in this hobby as a way to relax and get away from daily obligations.

Although players feel hesitant to call their hobby an "escape," due to a perceived negative connotation of escapism, they agree that video games help them decompress and get away from daily stressors. As one example, Paul says:

Yeah, one of the things I like the most about gaming is that actually, I do it to relax. At work, it can be stressful. Real life is stressful. You know, you buy a house, you buy a car, you crash your car… you have to take this pet to a vet, you have financial issues, or some kind of family or personal drama or something. There's always something going on and for me video games are really more of a mental escape. You know, I get home, I don't want to think about work anymore. If I had some drama in my life, I get home and I don't want to think about that. I want to focus on something else.

Video games are an opportunity to get away from anything that feels troublesome in life and players frequently note this as a reason to play single-player games. These types of game allow them to get

away from planning, expectations, schedules, and similar experiences that can often remind them of work. Players have a complex relationship to video games and stress, though. The majority acknowledge that they have had extremely stressful experiences with video games, sometimes to the point of breaking objects or quitting out of anger. This creates a difficult and confusing dynamic for many players who hope to use video games to relax, but when faced with a highly challenging level or feeling like they have let down their team, end up more frustrated and upset than they felt prior to engaging in their hobby.

Players do make strides to find what causes them less stress with their gaming experiences. As part of this, there is a gender-based difference in player approach. This gender difference is not universal in that there is some overlap between men and women, but it is important to note and adds an interesting element to our understanding of player behavior and perception. While players agree that video games serve as a means of relaxation, many male and female players define what counts as desirable or relaxing differently. Unexpectedly, male respondents are much more inclined to view social bonds as part of their relaxation time when playing video games. This is true even for cases where they began to feel frustrated by games. As one instance of this, James notes:

> …I know my friends are still gonna play, just 'cause I stop playin' it, you know, when the majority of your friends live in another state and the only interaction that you have with them anymore is through Xbox, you don't want to throw that away because you get mad at a game.

The desire to spend time with friends can supersede the hope to avoid a game that feels too challenging, too boring, or that causes the player more stress. Male players are more likely to establish video games as a specific part of their friendship routines, putting them in a position where if they cease to play a game, regardless of the reason, they will suffer the loss of important socializing time. Additionally, other respondents, like Chris, go out of their way to organize gaming sessions with friends whose lives are too busy to get together in physical spaces. These players establish these patterns at a younger age, with most discussing the importance of couch co-ops – games that can be played with multiple players in the same physical space – at friend gatherings and sleepovers. Although video games serve as an important bonding experience for most players at early ages, as discussed above, these players became much more reliant on this as a regular focal point of friend gatherings, rather than as one of many options to spend time together.

While many male players use gaming to maintain friendships, whether to cope with increasingly busy lives or after moving away from home, female players more often shun this idea, with only a few female respondents discussing the importance of gaming in the context of their social lives. As one example, Regina mentions, "I mean, that's kind of the reason why people play video games, is to escape. And to have fun. And the way I have fun is by not interacting with other people [laughs]." While some male respondents also feel this way, female respondents are much less likely to consider social interaction relaxing. Instead, having to schedule more time for a video game, play a particular role, play a specific video game, and have to plan or coordinate actions together is much less enjoyable to female players. This is seen as adding more obligations and responsibilities to their daily lives, rather than as a reprieve from them.

Although scheduling and pressure is a commonly cited concern with multiplayer games, there is also hesitation linked to hostile or annoying behaviors from other players. Some male players and users of general forums mention this as a reason for avoiding multiplayer games as well, but this is much more important among the female players both in forums and in interviews. Elaine, a respondent recruited from the online forums, highlights this consideration by stating:

> …it's funny, because my husband really enjoys MMOs and I'm like, "Uck! I don't wanna do that." Like, it's selfish in a way … I wanna be the one experiencing this and I don't want anyone else to get in

my way…I don't mind a random interaction from an NPC, but I don't want an interaction with a real person.[3] I don't want to waste the time or the energy, 'cause half the time… people are just being trolls or they're just wasting your time or they're 30 levels over you and a 12-year-old and they just want to go on a killing spree of everybody that's a lower level than they are. And it's like… why am I investing time in this game when people are just gonna be jerks? I'd rather just play on my own console, by myself, and I'm the only jerk around.

Hostility comes up often when players discuss their aversion to multiplayer games. Playing with unknown or not-well-known people conjures images of unpleasantness, tedium, and frustration for many players and can cause them to feel like they need to avoid certain game titles or genres to feel safe and comfortable in their hobby. Despite this commonality, however, these concerns become much more precise for female players, even when considering playing with friends. While not all female players feel this kind of pressure when playing with others, many worry about being judged or disappointing members of their team. Even playing with friends and family, Eva recalls:

Yeah, people are mean. People are so mean and they're so judgmental and I get so stressed out. Whether it's a more cooperative or more competitive game, I feel like people judge me or if it's a cooperative game, I'm gonna be letting my team down. Like when I was playing the MMO, that caused me a lot of stress. Like I cried real tears over really dumb stuff.

Playing in multiplayer situations, despite a frequent cultural emphasis on sociability for women who play video games, can lead to a great deal of stress and anxiety. Women in the sample and users of the female-oriented forums express that they feel much more pressure to be effective players in ways not discussed by men. As part of the picture of video games as a means for relaxation, it makes sense that women are less inclined to see gaming with other people as a positive or desirable experience.

A second major motivating factor for players is linked to the idea of story, touched on above. In the interview sample, the majority of players tend to be drawn to and discuss the story of a video game as a main deciding factor in terms of whether they enjoyed a game or not. Even for Gretchen, who is one of the exceptions and has been heavily involved in MMO play, single-player games are appreciated for, "…how immersive they are. Like a movie you're inside of. They can tell a story better than a lot of mediums."[4] It should be noted that story is not brought up in any interview questions, but respondents consistently mention it in terms of its importance and effectiveness in video games. Additionally, being able to affect and influence a story is important to most players. Tailoring the story to one's own preferences or actions is part of an immersive entertainment experience.

Many players want to feel connected to the game that they are playing. While they value challenge and discuss their proudest moments as overcoming something – a difficult boss or, for one player, a level that took 100 hours to complete – story helps the experience feel more real and more important overall. This allows more players to feel invested in those proud moments and to feel like their completion matters. Players mention that the story makes the world feel more fleshed out and makes the stakes of a game more believable.

Taking this into consideration, the third and final consistent motivating factor for players is indeed challenge. While relaxation and story are the most important aspects of video games for most players, challenge introduces another dynamic for players to feel satisfied with their experience. Although it is not true for the entirety of the sample, many male and female players both want to feel like they can improve their gameplay and come to a sense of pride for overcoming difficult tasks and challenges.

As one example, Darren suggests:

> …you see yourself improving, you can challenge yourself. I like the challenge aspect of it. With some of these games, basically you have to sit and read the manual before doing anything. To kind of understand all of the nuanced features, really, I guess getting the payoff later. Later on when you kind of know… you can take advantage of the features and play the game properly.

A sense of earned achievement is common among players as something that they hope to get out of a game. They frequently express a desire to watch their progress, replay games on increasing difficulty levels, and spend tens to hundreds of hours getting something just right in a game. This is what sets a video game apart from other forms of media. While someone can relax and get a story while reading a book or watching a movie, for example, they cannot affect that piece of media or become noticeably better at consuming it. Many players want to feel the sense of accomplishment provided by video games, often regardless of how much time or effort it might take.

Jackie, a female player with a full-time job who plays about 40 hours of video games per week, is just one example of this viewpoint:

> Probably 100%ing [*Bayonetta*], 'cause it involves playing the game three times on increasingly hard difficulties and it was really hard, it was demanding. That was a cool gaming achievement that I like to remember. Pretty much if I get a really, really hard achievement, that tends to stand out.

Challenge allows players to feel a sense of self-improvement and overcoming obstacles. When they recall their best moments, it is linked to these situations. Players in interviews and forums discuss the actions, levels, or decisions that they had the most difficult time with, whether because of skill or a learning curve. They revel in the ability to move beyond something that they have become stuck on or that they are sure they cannot possibly pass to get to the next experience in the game. Without even completing the game, the player can feel like they have won or achieved something.

This aspect of player motivation is not quite that simple, though. If a game becomes too challenging and does not offer possibilities for improvement or a clear path to victory, players feel discouraged and often walk away before figuring things out. This is something that comes up often in online forum discussions. Most players mention that discrepancies in achievable difficulty levels through a game can make them walk away. Additionally, games that are too challenging just do not seem "worth it" after players repeatedly fail. As one user of one of the general forums (GF1) mentions:

> I don't feel satisfied when I play difficult games. If I'm playing something difficult, I'll use walkthroughs on the hard parts before even trying on my own. If a game is too hard, I won't finish it. I just feel frustrated when I have a difficult part of a game to get through. I don't feel like it's worth the time and effort to fight my way through it.

While a moderate level of challenge can produce satisfaction with a game and an overall sense of pride, too much challenge places players in a position where they do not feel motivated to continue their experience with the game. Players also dislike games that feel too easy to accomplish goals in. Gameplay is something that is seen as needing to be balanced. With too much challenge, this leads to the game no longer being relaxing or rewarding, but instead becoming too much stress to try play through. With too little challenge, suddenly the game is boring and not interesting enough to continue.

CONCLUSION

Gender frequently steers people to filter into different occupations and interests based on cultural expectations and pressures tied to gender (Bradley 2000; Charles & Bradley 2009; Correll 2005; Lorber 1995). These differences have also been documented among video game players in terms of their preferences and activities as they relate to the hobby (Brunner, Bennett, & Honey 1998; Taylor 2008; Yee 2008, 2017). While this has frequently been the case, patterns appear to be getting less segregated, at least in terms of how players enter gaming and their preferences. Players are largely interested in the same things, but some gender differences remain. This is particularly true when considering the obstacles that women can face. This is seen most clearly in regard to feeling like they have additional pressures to cope with when playing with other people and a general desire to avoid social obligations when playing video games.

Beyond this, the similarities among players are striking. Relaxation draws the majority of players to the hobby, the story makes most of them invested, and challenge keeps many of them trying. While there are other motivating factors mentioned by those in the sample and among forum users, these are less commonly noted and more unique to individuals, rather than broader patterns that can be traced along lines of generally shared interests or influences of demographic categories like gender. The broader trends that are present belie common conceptualizations of video game players as highly driven by gender and suggest that more work should be done to understand the points of commonality in terms of video game marketing and design.

Given that most of the individuals in the sample entered gaming in similar ways and at similar times, it makes sense that their interests have followed similar trajectories. And these changes are unlikely to slow, whether it is due to players feeling more comfortable expressing diverse interests or due to video games becoming a more normalized part of culture. With women over the age of 18 comprising a larger segment of the gaming audience than teen boys and the average age of gamers consistently increasing (Entertainment Software Association [ESA] 2018), it is likely that more parents will be raising their children with easily available video games. Already the trend does appear to support parents playing together or watching their children play video games (ESA 2018) and even players in this sample recall their parents having a large role in their introduction to gaming. Similarly, in contrast to Yee (2006, 2008), fewer women are being introduced through male significant others, with parallel early experiences being extremely commonplace among interviewees and forum users. Though findings on women lacking a gaming social network appear to hold true in many cases (Taylor 2008; Yee 2008), this does not pose an insurmountable barrier for entry, access, or enjoyment.

Furthermore, industry differences also need to be better understood moving forward. With so many similarities between players, why do gaps remain where women entering professions involving games are concerned? Perhaps, the current generation of adult players is more used to an even playing field in hobby-based play, but not in competitive or professional video game involvement, including game development. Stereotypes clearly still dictate some behavior, making it difficult for many female players to enjoy playing with other people. These could translate to experiences in training for and actual attempts at participating in video game professions. Future research should build upon understanding how players get to where they are currently, including those involved in the industry. This will be integral for constructing a richer picture of why people end up in particular positions or avoid different types of engagement with video games, allowing us to see causes and consequences of wide-ranging gender disparities more clearly. Future studies should also broadly continue this line of inquiry to better generalize findings about player behaviors, histories, and preferences as they relate to gender.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Quotations from interview respondents have been minimally edited for clarity. Quotations from online forum users have also been edited and paraphrased to protect users' identities.

[2] Female-oriented forums are much more frequently used for building social networks with other players.

[3] An NPC is a non-playable character; a character that you can interact with in a game, but is part of the design.

[4] Gretchen held a leadership position in a nationally ranked guild.