

Player Definitions of Success, Skill, and Leadership in Video Games

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ABSTRACT

Gender is a defining aspect of many daily understandings, perceptions, and definitions. Culturally, this influence can lead to many disadvantages and barriers for women. This project investigates these topics as they relate to video game players. Using interviews and online forum analysis, the author explores players' experiences, beliefs, and definitions to investigate the potential influences of gender on access and status in the video game community. Ultimately, players are found to identify success in gender-neutral terms, suggesting that the landscape may be equal for women in the hobby. However, when it comes to skill and leadership, players have ideas that reinforce gender stereotypes, creating a circumstance where players reflect many of the same kinds of gendered hierarchies seen in other areas of life. This has implications for many public spaces and suggests that movements toward gender parity exert an uneven influence on cultural understandings.

Keywords

gender, access, perception, bias, success, skill, leadership

INTRODUCTION

Social conceptualizations of gender can create specific opportunities, barriers, and lenses through which to see the world. This influences social perceptions in important and substantial ways, including shaping how we define a variety of actions and capabilities. Often, and especially in the context of the workforce, women have been seen as less competent and having fewer skills than their male counterparts (Bryce & Rutter 2003; Heilman 2012; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins 2004; Ridgeway 2011; Yee 2008). While the workforce has been the primary focus of much of the research on these inequalities, this can happen well beyond professional contexts. In tech and gaming spaces, there is a long-enduring sense that men – and masculinity – are the norm (Dickey 2006; Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill 2016; Salter & Blodgett 2012). This is, of course, despite the nearly equal proportion of women who play video games (Entertainment Software Association [ESA] 2018).

This combination of presumptions of gender in these spaces and an increasing movement toward gender parity offer a new puzzle – what happens when more women enter a space that has a history of being seen as male-dominated? While reducing video gaming to a subculture may be too simplistic, these spaces also exhibit many subcultural qualities, including building their own understandings and ways of interacting with the world (Shaw 2010). These subcultures are typically gendered, leading to difficulties and often hostilities for women entering gaming spaces (Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill 2016; Harrison, Drenten, & Pendarvis 2016). Importantly, they are also guided by existing cultural biases and beliefs in society. This study seeks to

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understand some of the specific taken-for-granted meanings developed among video game players. Has the movement toward gender parity caused an adjustment in the definitions that players apply to concepts in gaming spaces? In particular, how do video game players view issues of success, skill, and leadership?

Using qualitative methods, this study contextualizes player definitions within previously conducted work on gender and culturally masculine spaces. Three different theoretical possibilities were explored. The first was that due to an increasing number of women involved in gaming (ESA 2018), this could break down the more male-dominated culture, allowing women to find themselves in a position where success is as easily attained as it is for men. The second was that there could be more cultural resistance to women's presence, allowing for barriers to be created through definitions and perceptions (Ridgeway 2011; Taylor 2012). Finally, the third possibility was that women may be generally seen as equally competent in many regards when it comes to gaming, but cultural beliefs could continue to lead to subconscious biases and disadvantaging (Heilman 2012).

Ultimately, the discussions that players engage in indicate that any influence exerted by demographic shifts is uneven. When players consider success, they think of it in non-gendered terms. When they define skill, they tend to use more masculine understandings. When it comes to leadership, they use culturally feminine definitions.

Skill and Access to Success

Access to success is frequently constrained, with cultural beliefs about gender helping to shape understandings of skill and thus pathways to achievement. Sex segregation is common and there is a tendency to build environments that can be hostile toward women in spaces that are widely associated with men (Alfrey & Twine 2017). Women in spaces associated with men are often questioned and distrusted in terms of their ability, qualifications, and dedication (Bryce & Rutter 2003; Heilman et al. 2004; Ridgeway 2011; Yee 2008). These perceptions have led to observations of a "glass escalator" effect where men get fast-tracked to the top of female-dominated fields, though it is important to note that this is deeply affected by intersections with race as well (Williams 2013; Wingfield 2009).

Culturally, women tend to be assessed and have their abilities viewed more negatively than men, even in cases where they demonstrate clear skill (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Heilman & Okimoto 2007; Heilman et al. 2004; Ridgeway 2011). Work associated with women, therefore, often becomes less culturally valued (Ridgeway & Correll 2004). Further, ideas about success are influenced by gender, with men tending to view success in tangible or financial terms, while women use more individualized definitions (Dyke & Murphy 2006; Williams et al. 2009).

These influences and differences extend to tech- and gaming-related areas as well. In tech fields, people assigned female at birth that have gender-fluid/masculine expressions and contribute to the male-dominated space can achieve more acceptance, though this access is limited for women in underrepresented racial and ethnic categories (Alfrey & Twine 2017). When it comes to defining success, gender can also influence player perceptions. For example, women who play video games are less likely than men to define gaming success in instrumental terms (Hamlen 2010). At the same time, however, more masculine expectations are adopted by players in general. Good in-game gear is seen as a path to success, regardless of player gender (Taylor 2003, 2006). Additionally, in the area of professional play and eSports, women tend to be met with challenges to their legitimacy and have few paths to increasing their skill due to stereotypes about ability (Taylor 2012).

Effective Leadership

Understandings of leadership become entangled with expectations for ability, skill, and success. Leadership tends to be associated with men, masculinity, and more highly ranked positions (Eagly 2007; Kolb 2006), while “friendliness and cooperativeness” are traits that are culturally linked to lower positions (Gorman 2005, 722). Styles of leadership have also been observed as having gendered components, with women leading in more people-oriented ways (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt 2001; Rosener 2011). Women also appear to define their own leadership in more personal and social ways, with an understanding that is more collaborative and frequently allows input from team members (Rosener 2011). These relational qualities have become increasingly integrated into management positions (Loughlin, Arnold, & Crawford 2012; Peterson 2014). This has resulted in more leadership opportunities for women, but at the expense of prestige and status. Women in these positions need to do more work, are held to higher expectations, and get less in return for their efforts (Gorman & Kmec 2007; Peterson 2014).

In many professional situations, especially in cases where women occupy positions in male-coded spaces, divergent expectations about leadership can lead to the use of softeners¹ among women as they try to navigate norms of gender and leadership (Koch, Mueller, Kruse, & Zumbach 2005). This has also been observed in the behaviors of video game players. Because video games still tend to be a culturally masculine space, this places women in a position where they need to establish themselves between gaming and cultural gender expectations and norms. For example, this has been observed among players of *EverQuest*, where women use softeners on message boards by displaying femininity through things like username choice in conjunction with expressions of power by posting images of the gear achieved in-game (Taylor 2006).

DATA AND METHODS

This data and analysis stems from a larger project to better understand player behaviors and experiences. Data was gathered through qualitative methods and findings are based on analysis of 54 interviews with current adult video game players and text analysis of approximately 2,000 online forum discussions. Although analysis is not quantified, responses are included if most (at least approximately 60%) posts or respondents conveyed an idea, unless otherwise specified. Interview respondents were contacted through online recruitment on online gaming forums and network sampling to ensure that players are well integrated into the community. The sample included 31 women and respondents represented an age range of 22-38. The majority of players are spread across the western, mid-western, and southern United States, with some respondents in Canada, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and Brazil. Interviews lasted approximately one to two hours and were semi-structured to allow for deeper explorations of player experience. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate coding for themes and patterns. On average, these players spent about ten to 20 hours per week playing video games, with a general range of zero to 40 predictable weekly hours. No significant gender difference in play time was reported.

For online forum analysis, both live and archival observations were used to collect data on a wide range of topics related to gaming experiences. Targeted searches for terms related to skill, success, and leadership were used for archival collection. Five forums were sites for collection, with two being much larger (one at ten million users and the other at just under 700,000 users) and developed for general audiences and three with fewer users (approximately 35,000, 6,000, and 4,500 users) with an orientation toward women who play games. For the three largest forums, daily live observations totaled at 525 posts each and, due to less activity, the two smallest forums totaled at 125 each.

Coding began in word processing notes during transcription and observation. During this stage of coding, general themes were addressed. This process continued through Dedoose software toward more specific coding schemes for patterns linked to success, skill, and leadership as broadly discussed by interviewees throughout the interview process and in online forum posts. Responses were sorted with labels through the program to highlight specific instances where the primary topics became relevant and responses were tallied to determine players' most common and frequently expressed feelings. The patterns are discussed below, with quotations for context from pseudonymized identities to protect respondent privacy and cleaned up (e.g., removal of filler words) wording for clarity.

FINDINGS

Ultimately, these topics are not evenly influenced by broader cultural assumptions about gender. Many of the gendered influences seen in other areas of life are surprisingly absent from ideas of success. Players' definitions are very similar to women's definitions of success more generally – the concept is seen as highly individual and personal. Despite this pattern, gendered ideas still guide perceptions of skill and leadership in more stringent ways. In terms of skill, players focus their attention on both innate and culturally masculine qualities. When it comes to leadership, however, players highlight more culturally feminine ideals, including social skills.

Success in the Eye of the Beholder

When players consider what makes a successful video game player, the concept is met with confusion and reluctance at first. Neither men nor women had given much thought to this idea. Within the context of hobby-oriented play, respondents note that being successful at gaming is akin to being successful at consuming any media. It all depends on the game, the player, and their goals. There is an overall consensus among the majority of respondents that success is an individual endeavor in gaming. For example, Paul suggests:

I feel like that's got to be personal. That's up to the individual player. Because what I define as success for myself is not going to be the same for someone else. Like, for me, it might be 100-percenting a game or beating it on the hardest difficulty or getting an achievement or something, but for somebody else, it might be winning a *Super Smash Bros.* tournament or just beating a game on any difficulty, you know, there are different skill levels. And my accomplishments aren't necessarily going to be the same as someone else's.

Some respondents took the question more literally, mentioning that simply being able to turn on a system and insert a disc could make a player successful, but the individualized idea of what success looks like was true for nearly all respondents and was reflected in many online discussions. If one wants to finish a game, that could be success. If the goal is to gather all of the possible items to collect, that could be success, too. Because players come to video games for a variety of different reasons and with different overall motivations, it is important to consider this when defining success for the average player.

When getting into specifics about this, however, there are additional important factors in success. Enjoyment, fun, and getting what one wants out of the experience stand out as the primary aspects of successful gameplay. Gaming is not supposed to be stressful or a negative experience. As Jackie puts it, playing video games is, "...supposed to be

a hobby. It's not supposed to be a lifestyle, it's just supposed to be something that you do in your spare time." This tendency to avoid placing too much importance on gaming ties with the apparent low-stakes of what can count as success for everyday players.

While players are open with this idea, they do project some of their own values onto what can be deemed fun or enjoyable. This is particularly true of women, who note watching other people – mostly men – play only to be confused about why that person persists with a game. Specific behaviors like “grinding,” or doing the same repetitive actions over and over to obtain something that will help the player advance, is discussed as potentially not successful. For Eva, this sentiment comes from watching her husband play:

I dunno, I don't think you're successful if you look at playing video games like having a job. Like the way Ben plays video games kind of drives me nuts because he'll do things that he hates, like he's not having fun. He says he is, but he's not, I can tell. He'll be just grinding an area for hours and hours and I'm like, “Are you having fun?” and he's like, “No.” “Well why are you doing it?” and he's like, “I have to.” To me, I dunno, that's not successful.

Within the open-ended conceptualization of success, women are inclined to focus on whether or not someone is having a good gaming experience, which should be obvious and feature apparent hallmarks of “fun.” What has been discussed as “playbor”² in other studies cannot necessarily immediately be seen as enjoyable and thus success is called into question. Stress, completing required activities through tedious in-game action, and getting angry at the game do not seem successful on the surface, even if these are ultimately pathways to accessing enjoyable content.

Broadly, the concept of success remains not immediately influenced by cultural ideals tied to gender. For the majority of the sample, success is easy to achieve for everyday players. Few respondents are inclined to mention monetary gain or getting attention as success. The concept is neither culturally masculine in terms of expecting instrumental gain or feminine in terms of more social or communal qualities and considerations, but rather independently defined and achieved. This may be due to the increase in female players in hobby-based play, which could begin to influence perceptions in gaming culture. This offers a positive possibility for women interested in entering the hobby, if many common pressures and expectations in male-dominated spaces are reducing in frequency and intensity.

Skill out of Reach

Skill is not met the same level of openness and there is much less hesitation when players consider who is good or skilled at video games. Unlike success, specific traits and associations are easily accessed when defining skill. These traits are also more frequently culturally associated with masculinity and increase in perceived importance when considering the best of the best. Further, for all respondents, there are shared ideas about what allows a player to build or have skill in terms of video games. However, men are more likely to add additional broader swaths of characteristics and behaviors with less overall consensus than women.

Among the most highlighted aspects of having and developing skill are practice and having a lot of free time. Often, this taps into some common gaming stereotypes that paint players as lacking social skills. Images of the isolated male gamer in a basement are conjured – only somewhat jokingly – during these discussions. Frequently,

professional or highly competitive players are seen as the epitome of skill and demanding practice schedules are acknowledged as a major part of this. For Gareth:

...commitment of time would be another big one. Professional gamers spend an extraordinary amount of time playing the games that they want to be good at and they're very disciplined enough to practice the skill and all of the necessary skills to be the best of what they want to be at.

There is a firm idea of putting a great deal of time into learning everything there is to know about a game so that one can play it well. Skill tends to also be thought of as directly related to professional play. In some cases, however, respondents have a negative perception of this. To be truly skilled, professional players cannot "have a life," because gaming necessarily takes up all of their time. Most respondents acknowledge the stereotype of the gamer who lacks a social life and suggest that it is good that society is largely moving away from it, but it lingers in their descriptions of excellent players. Broadly, respondents note that a lot of time to dedicate to gaming is integral for increasing skill in any hobby or endeavor, so it would make sense that time dedication would be important for gaming as well.

Other commonly expressed ideas about what makes someone good involve traits that are considered more innate. The second most mentioned aspects of skill for gaming are having good reflexes and good hand-eye coordination³. These aspects of playing video games are seen as something that one is born with, but not necessarily something that a player can increase with practice. While learning the game and increasing knowledge is accessible – if you have the time – this is much more discouraging in terms of prospects for improvement.

Finally, other factors involve markers to let you know that someone is skilled. Having a high score, achieving a good kill ratio, or ranking in competitive gaming are seen as ways to know more concretely that someone is good at games. This further complicates gendered perspectives, due to more men being involved with competitive play, particularly at high levels (Taylor 2012). Men also mention an innate aspect to this – having a personality for competitive play. One needs to be motivated to challenge others and overcome other players' abilities.

Because of the trend toward masculine interpretations of skill, it is perhaps not surprising that players immediately consider men that they know in their lives as examples of good players. Additionally, for women, these examples are frequently romantic attachments. For instance, Jackie says, "Well, you know, I think my husband is actually really, really good at video games. He's got the mind for it, he's got the reflexes for it, he's really good." This comes up in response to being asked to describe a good player. Men more often give imaginary male examples but are also inclined to suggest male friends. This further illustrates the tendency to link skill and being "good" as a specifically masculine endeavor. The discussions also include certain traits that their male examples exhibit, including ideas about being knowledgeable, as seen in Elaine's description of her husband:

[laughs] This is gonna sound silly. I would say... I'm thinking of my husband right now, 'cause he gets really good at video games... I would say he spends a lot of time on them, he figures out how to "play the game," in quotes, let's say. He knows what game engines are looking for or he figures out the combos. He's very aware of how he

plays, he invests a lot of time in playing and... yeah, I'm trying to think. Those would probably be the main things I can think of right now. This magic person.

Despite hedging her answer with apparent embarrassment, she speaks about her husband's ability with considerations of knowing his own playstyle and knowing a lot of information about how to work within the game's system. Specific men in the majority of these players' lives appear to exhibit these qualities, with many examples being offered that encompass ideas of knowledge, tinkering, and exploring the inner workings of the game. These recommendations are likely subconscious, but it speaks to the links that continue to persist between men and ideas of skill in gaming.

No one in the interview sample and only a few online posts discuss female players as examples of "good" players. Even when considering people that they do not know personally, they suggest or mention memorable male players. This suggests that while success is open and accessible, the idea of skill likely lends itself to additional obstacles for women who wish to pursue video games at a higher level. Skill is perceived and defined in more masculine – and often more seemingly inherent – terms. This places women in a position where these factors in addition to possibly being culturally viewed as unfit can leave them with few options for exploration and improvement.

Leadership, Friendliness, and Maintaining Order

Leadership is less broadly applicable to gaming experiences than ideas of success and skill, due to its association with specific genres and contexts, but this is another aspect that players tend to agree on. Unlike skill, however, leadership is not seen in a masculine way and is defined instead by more feminine qualities and expectations. Respondents highlight social intelligence and abilities as the paramount concerns in leading multiplayer play. Although it seems positive to introduce these possibilities for women to climb up in rank, leadership is also discussed as largely undesirable. These are positions that players do not necessarily want, but sometimes feel obligated to fulfill. This suggests that guild leadership in video games has gone through a similar process to what we see with managerial positions that have become more feminized – added stress and work, with a decrease in prestige.

When discussing the qualities that a leader should have in gaming, regardless of gender, the most frequently suggested idea is communication. This involves anything from presenting ideas clearly to the ability to direct your team in a calm way. This also involves being able to really know the people you are playing with and how to speak to them specifically to make the process run smoothly. For Jamie, she mentions:

You know, maybe one person you can be like, "Stop messin' around, get over here," and other people, you need to be like... you know just the way you talk to your friends, knowing how they're going to react well, and just knowing how to talk to your group so you stay, you know, a group. And if you have two people that just start throwing down with each other and never speak to each other again, that's not gonna go well. And unfortunately, that's how I feel like a lot of team leaders do it, it's not that their friendship isn't important, I'm sure it is, but they're also like, "Oh my god there will never be a team again." You need to be able to keep them together.

Although being able to communicate effectively is largely strategic, it is considered an essential part of a leader's role in multiplayer games. Communication is necessary for

keeping the team together, ensuring that everyone can agree on what needs to happen, and keeping people motivated to achieve goals. Relatedly, women specifically convey a sense about general demands of demeanor. Beyond the possible promotion of solidarity, female players also feel that empathy or compassion, being friendly, having a motivational attitude, and charisma are all important in a leader. As June states:

...being friendly, so like someone that people want to play with and like dedicate their time to... and being able to praise people for what they do well and kind of gently suggest, “Hey, I think so and so might need help if someone can get over there.” So, attentiveness, organization, and interpersonal skills, more generally. Be a nice person.

In part, this is due to players not wanting a “boss.” Because most players associate their gameplay with leisure and relaxation (see also Tomlinson 2019), they emphasize that having someone who is not personable guiding them in the game is unappealing. This, however, is also a reason that most players do not want to add the stress of being a leader to their gaming experience, as discussed below. When it comes to leadership in games, “boss[ing] people around” is seen as a negative and players, particularly women, prefer a positive and supportive style. This approach is regarded as more effective in terms of getting people to work together and do what needs to be done.

Additionally, players note that being a good listener is an important part leadership in gaming settings. When a guild leader is more interested in their own goals, rather than the group’s, it makes the process more difficult and less appealing. This ties again to being able to understand a group’s dynamics – listening to what the group wants and tailoring your approach and goals to them comes back to the perceived relational nature of leadership in team play. It also reflects another expectation from respondents – knowing how to delegate the right tasks to the right players. Leaders are expected to be aware of who they are working with, how they work together, and how to maintain the bonds within the team. Along with the pressures of planning where everyone should go for a specific mission in the game, leaders must have a certain finesse when it comes to social and emotional interaction.

Despite the importance of social skills, there is an absence of an emphasis on skill at the game. While ability to maintain social cohesion, understand players, and listen are at the forefront of players’ minds, technical skill does not come up as necessary. Emphasizing this factor, women in the sample who have led groups before specifically mention that skill is not part of fulfilling this role. While this is not a large portion of the sample, it does reflect common experiences among women giving themselves negative evaluations or self-assessments. As Jane, a video game developer and a self-professed excellent leader in games, says:

Not skill. It’s not skill. It does not take skill. I’m not good at video games. Like, I say to people all the time, I’m not good at video games. I surround myself with people who are good at video games. I just care about having fun and I let them do all of the hard work.

Although women in the sample are able to define themselves as good leaders, they express hesitation or complete denial of gaming ability and skill. This refusal to acknowledge skill, even with evidence from game progress, is true of the majority of women in the sample, regardless of participation in leadership. From the women who have led in gaming settings, this highlights the issue of gendered perception among

video game players more clearly – skill is not available to female players. Within the confines of perception in gaming, leadership is an option, but being good at a game is less so.

Beyond the qualities expected of a leader and self-deprecation from women regarding their skill, players have many thoughts about the desirability of a leadership role in gaming. While some players who have led in video games enjoyed the role and take pride in the achievements they helped their groups reach, it is still common for them to express a lack of desire to ever return to the role. This lack of interest is true for players who have been leaders as well as those who have played in group contexts.

Most of the players in the sample who had previously led games are women, which is noted to be fairly common in online discussions and based on the observations of Gretchen, a former leader of a highly ranked guild in *World of Warcraft*. According to several of these women, leadership has been a role that they did not seek out, but that was presented to them because someone needed to do it. While the majority would not want to go back, some of these players feel like this is a role that needs to be filled and gain some sense of enjoyment from it. For Gretchen, her pride came from being able to contribute to great successes. For Jane, it is more related to her perceived natural tendency to fall into leadership roles. As she mentions:

Jane: For multiplayer games... I am usually the one organizing.

Interviewer: How did you get to that point?

Jane: I don't know... I'm bossy. Because they're all lazy boys that won't do anything unless you tell them what to do.

Interviewer: You just kind of fall into these positions?

Jane: Yeah... yeah, it's definitely in my personality type to organize and just lead things. Which, I guess is sort of reflected in my role here. I'm bossing around a bunch of boys here, so nothing ever changes, right?

Interviewer: Do you enjoy it?

Jane: Oh, yeah, I love it. Or... I mean, it's not something that I purposefully think about, it just sort of happens.

The story of being selected for leadership is common. The sense that the position came naturally was also shared among players, but the feeling of enjoyment is mixed. While Jane notes that she enjoys “bossing” the boys around, other players mention that leadership was often a lot of work that they would not return to. They express that they felt accomplishment for helping to guide a team to victory as leaders, but struggle with the realities and many social stresses of the experience. In addition to managing player schedules, leaders need to manage player preferences, social relationships, and even drama. Because of this, the position can often feel like having to work as a kind of administrator – behaviors that they often use video games to get away from.

Gender's influence on perceptions of skill intersects with ideas of leadership, taking the two aspects of video game play in different directions when it comes to expectations. Leadership reflects much of what has been seen as a result of feminization

of other areas of social life. Due to the extensive obligations and possible areas of discomfort, leadership frequently becomes unappealing for players. Further, players do not discuss it in a way that indicates prestige, status, or consistent satisfaction. While feminine qualities tend to be emphasized by players, the role of leader is seen as necessary, but not positive.

CONCLUSION

This project has set a foundation for further exploration of these evolving issues of player perception, definition, and experience. Future work should delve further into these topics to better understand the changing dynamics of gaming culture and should investigate the links between these concepts and gender, but also the influences and ties that may be seen with race and ethnicity, which was unfortunately not able to be addressed adequately with this project's sample.

Based on the current study, it seems that the increasing gender parity in video games may be shaping the overall understandings of success as personal and individualized, but why do gaps remain in definitions of skill and leadership? Based on shifting demographics, gender theory, and previous research, and given that video games are still largely understood as a masculine space, there were three possibilities for how players would define concepts of success, skill, and leadership. First, women may have equal access because of the shift toward gender parity in the gaming community. Second, there was the possibility that women may be blocked from meaningful access because of an emphasis on masculine definitions. Finally, women could be seen as having equal capability to achieve, but still be prevented from having any real advantage due to a lack of prestige associated with these terms.

Instead of a general pattern, the influence of gender in the community is applied unevenly. When it comes to success, there does appear to be a shift. While men and women typically have different understandings of success, with women being more focused on social ties and men emphasizing material accumulation (Dyke & Murphy 2006; Williams et al. 2009), this does not appear to be the case in video games. For these players, success is equal opportunity and attuned to the individual. Previous work on gaming spaces has indicated that players share definitions of success, but they tend to be driven by masculine cultural standards (Taylor 2003, 2006, 2012), while the players in this study are more open to broad conceptualizations of success. This is likely a result of not speaking primarily to players who focus on massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), but is an overall positive for women. This opens up the possibility of being taken more seriously and being seen as capable in the broader gaming community and suggests that moving toward more gender parity may shift a site-specific culture away from limiting definitions.

However, this openness does not extend to all areas of gaming. While success may seem like it necessarily involves skill, players separate the two. This presents an opportunity for players to continue to apply a gendered lens to proficiency with video games, despite the open ideas they have when considering success. Skill is more material and more associated with culturally masculine qualities – competition and excelling above other players are viewed as vital. Adding to this, many of the qualities of skilled players are deemed innate, creating a circumstance where players may be dissuaded from attempting to become “good” at games. Women in particular are likely to be influenced away from pursuing competitive or non-hobby play, due to masculine expectations and possible pressures from gendered assessments of their performance.

Skill is also not inherently linked to leadership for players. In this case, gender still exerts an influence, but in the opposite direction. Although leadership is typically associated with men, there are some – often more social – circumstances that present

the possibility for more feminine approaches (Eagly 2007; Gorman 2005; Kawakami, White, & Langer 2000; Kolb 2006; Rosener 1990, 2011). In male-dominated or more masculine settings, however, feminine approaches to leadership tend to be viewed as less effective (Eagly 2007; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt 2001). What is observed in video game spaces, however, in the context of a more masculine culture, is that feminine qualities are upheld as ideal for leadership. Players – both as leaders and group members – stress the importance of communication and support. Leadership in this context is viewed as highly social, and thus requiring a knowledgeable, but friendly, approach. This seems like it may create more opportunities for women, but rather than a positive opening to gain status in gaming, the positions are seen as having little prestige. Reflecting what has been observed in managerial positions (Loughlin, Arnold, & Crawford 2012; Peterson 2014), the feminization of leadership in multiplayer games comes with extra work and little praise, making the positions largely undesirable. Men and women who have served as multiplayer leaders both cite more sources of frustration than benefits. This establishes a veneer of possibility for feminine qualities and expressions to pave potential pathways to achievement for women.

These patterns suggest that video games operate differently than other masculine and male-dominated spaces, at least where success is concerned. Women in this case have more avenues for being seen as successful, with fewer possibilities of being dismissed immediately due to their gender. This is mainly true for general gaming audiences, though, where women have achieved near gender parity. This introduces interesting insights into male-dominated spaces and change in terms of what doors may open and when. Despite these gains, however, women are still placed in limited positions by cultural ideals tied to skill and leadership. This suggests that increasing the number of women in male-dominated spaces may present avenues for a reduction in gender stereotyping, but with uneven and limited results that can maintain inequality in pockets of the space, especially where more tangible achievement is involved.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Softeners are behaviors or expressions that reduce the perceived or assumed violation of social norms (Cameron 1992).

² Playbour or playbor is the tendency of players to engage in repetitive, tedious, or (Kücklich 2005; Taylor 2006).

³ Hand-eye coordination, reflexes, and spatial recognition are socially associated with men, which can lead to harsher self-perceptions among women who play video games (Cherney 2008; Jenson & de Castell 2004).