

# Gendered Gaming Experience in Social Space: From Home to Internet Café

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores how the social relations embedded in varied gaming spaces affect players' online gaming experiences, and how gender comes into play in such spatial experiences. Three major sites of online gaming in Taiwan are examined: (1) home as a space of domestic surveillance and discipline; (2) NetCafé as a stigmatized public leisure space; and (3) the student dormitory as gender-segregated space. The results show that social interactions in both virtual and physical spaces are of central importance for the enjoyment of online gamers. Compared with their male counterparts, girls are subjected to more restricted regulations and fewer chances of visiting NetCafé with friends. The size of the playing circle also affects the game playing culture in gender-segregated student dormitories. Bigger circles of players could form peer pressure on non-players, whereas smaller circles usually means fewer resources and lonelier experience.

## **Keywords**

Gaming experience, gaming environment, home, Internet café, dormitory, gender differences

## **INTRODUCTION**

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In the last few years, online gaming has been booming in Asian societies, especially in South Korea and Taiwan. In addition to playing console games or PC games at home, many game players, children and adults alike, choose to play online games at the Internet cafés.<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that broadband Internet connection is very common among urban households in Taipei,<sup>2</sup> many gamers prefer playing online games in public spaces like NetCafés than at home. This is an interesting phenomenon given that the mainstream mass media have imprinted a rather negative image of NetCafés on people's mind. On the legal front, the governments enact a nighttime curfew regulating the entry of teenagers to NetCafés;<sup>3</sup> yet students in school uniform still pay regular visits to NetCafés – at risk of their parents being informed by the police of their delinquent behavior. Therefore, the NetCafé must have offered more incentives to the gamers other than providing an economically rational means of going online, or a convenient alternative gaming place.

Why people with internet access at home still visit NetCafés? Previous findings [1] conclude that socializing is the main incentive behind players' preference of NetCafés, a conclusion confirmed by our observations. NetCafés are places where people play online games with friends, exchanging tactics, helping each other out in games and in the process making more new friends. As a result, experience in virtual space is enhanced by peer interaction in physical space [1, 2]. In other words, online gaming is an extension of, rather than a break from our existing social network of leisure activities. On this account, the fact that NetCafés are dominated by male customers might have some bearing on gender differences in online gaming experiences. Research shows that due to the social expectation of appropriate gender roles, girls are encouraged to play at domestic space and stay away from the public domain such as NetCafés [1]. Does the lack of public leisure space deprive girls of their chances to interact with their "real" communities, thus taking away part of girls' satisfaction of playing?

Previous research on gender differences in computer gaming tends to focus on the game text. According to this line of reasoning, the stereotypical content of computer games and the masculine nature of popular game genres are the main reasons accounting for woman's withdrawal from computer games. Few studies have paid attention to the gaming context, such as the controlled access of technology for females. A series of studies by Bryce and Rutter [1, 2] turned the focus from text to the social, spatial aspects of computer gaming. They analyzed how the female leisure constraints to public gaming space and activities hamper the visibility and participation of the female players.

Following this line of research inquiry, this paper explores how the social relations embedded in different gaming spaces affect the players' online gaming experiences, and how gender comes into play in such varied spatial experiences. Playing behaviors of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are the subject of investigation. Three

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike Internet cafés in many western societies such as the London NetCafé studied by Nina Wakeford [11], the predominant activity of the cyber café customers in Taiwan is online gaming. Only a very small proportion of Netcafé goers are using other functions such as email or WWW. Notably, some Internet cafés don't even have basic word processing software installed in their computers.

<sup>2</sup> According to a survey conducted by Taiwan Network Information Center (TWNIC) in 2005, about 65% of total Taiwanese households have internet connection. More than half of total households (53.6%) have broadband service subscription. In Taipei, about 63% of households have broadband service [9].

<sup>3</sup> For example, children and teenagers are prohibited from entering NetCafés during school days and late hours. Governments have imposed curfews on teenagers and the police would advice them to leave the venues before 10 p.m., 11 p.m. or midnight.

major spaces are examined here: (1) home as a space of domestic surveillance and discipline; (2) NetCafé as a stigmatized public leisure space; and (3) student dormitory as gender-segregated space. The conclusion shows that social interactions in both virtual and physical spaces are of central importance for the enjoyment of online gamers. That is to say, participation in group activity factors in one's online gaming experience. Moreover, in compliance with society's expectation towards gender roles, girls have to observe a more rigid regulation and are discouraged from visiting NetCafé with friends.

The picture gets more complicated when we move to the college dormitory. On the one hand, many college students living in dormitories can play with friends in an environment free from the stigma of NetCafé and surveillance of parents at home. On the other hand, their gaming experiences are highly gendered given the fact that the college dormitories in Taiwan have been kept as a gender-segregated setting, where students of different sex live in separate dormitories. Gamers in the male student dormitories play in a highly competitive gaming culture. The nature of game participation here is very different from that in the female student dormitories.

## **METHOD & DATA**

The sources of data used in this study mainly come from twenty in-depth interviews and nine focus group interviews with computer game players and their family members. Most of them have played MMORPGs before.<sup>4</sup> A total of 56 interviewees were selected for in-depth interviews, using purposive snowball sampling method to ensure diversity of age, educational background, geographical location and sexual orientation. Of them, 22 are female, and the rest of them are male. The sample includes 12 primary school students, 8 junior high school students, 17 senior high school students, 10 college students, 3 graduate students, 2 journalists, 2 housewives, 1 social worker, and 1 junior high school teacher. The ages of interviewees range from 11 to 54. Three of the interviewees identify themselves as homosexual. In addition, notes from participant observations in NetCafés in Taipei metropolitan area are used as supplementary background materials.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Playing at Home**

#### *Stigmatized gaming and the ambivalent gaming machine*

Computer games have long received a great deal of public concern in their potential in causing addiction and the alleged influence of their violent content on the gamers' behavior. As the average age of game players gets higher, online games are further regarded by the mainstream media as luring children and the youth away from school work, and adults from real life obligations. However, as the playing devices for online games, computers at home are also "educational devices" that facilitate children's learning abilities and futuristic skills, and the usage of computer is generally encouraged by parents [8].

The ambiguous and contradictory images of computers put parents of school children in a difficult situation. Parents are often compelled to buy computers and equip them with Internet connection in order to better prepare their children for academic performance.<sup>5</sup> At the same time

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<sup>4</sup> Among the five interviewees who did not play MMORPG, two are players' mothers, and the other three play video games.

<sup>5</sup> Almost all of the interviewees said that their home computers were purchased for educational purposes, or so did

they have to constantly monitor children's usage of computers to ensure no misuse or overuse<sup>6</sup> taking place at home. Accordingly, many home computers were placed in areas like the living room, or even in the parents' bedroom so as to ensure convenient parental supervision. Controlling the time for game playing is also a common practice among parents for rewarding/punishing their children's academic performance.

### *"Disciplined space"*

For many of our interviewees, playing computer games at home has its advantages. If parents hold a relatively lenient attitude toward game playing, the home environment could be relaxing and comfortable.<sup>7</sup> Kids or teenagers have no need to worry about the safety issue of staying out late, or the cost of NetCafé consumption. However, parental surveillance is the most common complaint from the interviewees who play games at home. Almost all parents impose certain rules on their children's computer gaming activity. Some parents allowed a certain playing time each day, or after children finished their homework. Others set passwords on home computers, or seize computers for a period of time as children violate the rules or agreements on computer game playing.

To make sure that the rules are followed, parents have to constantly check on children. This creates an atmosphere of surveillance and generates complaints over privacy issues. Many interviewees were very sensitive and uncomfortable to the repetitive parental gaze, for it hinders chatting with friends in MMORPGs, and spoils the fun of gaming. *"Don't we call it 'personal' computer? It's supposed to be personal!"* (Trevor, age 26). Yet children are certainly not short of strategies to avoid parental regulation and supervision. Some lie about having finished homework (Emily, age 16), some play with the notebook computer which can be flipped down in an instant when parent comes nearby, and some have several windows opened for instant switching back and forth. Nevertheless, the most common strategy to avoid adult surveillance is to play when parents are asleep. *"Getting up after midnight to play computer games is a culture of high school students."*

In addition to adult supervision, playing computer games at the domestic setting usually involves few group activities, and also the need to cope with family daily routines. Gaming thus is less of a peer activity and more of a part of family life in which the child usually has limited control over whether, when and how long he/she could play. Furthermore, interruption of all sorts is another troubling matter to many home players. Interviewees reported that they were sometimes sent to run family errands, ordered around to help house chores, or simply being nagged while playing games. Such interruptions could be very annoying to players. If interruptions had occurred in times of castle siege or raids in MMORPGs like Lineage, it could have caused severe damage to the gamers in the game world. If sharing computer with siblings or other family members is an issue at home, control over game play is further complicated by negotiation with family members over the ownership, control and usage of computer. It is here the existing power relations among family members and a culture of gendered technology come into play in the negotiating process [5, 7].

Our interviews suggest that, when siblings have to share computer(s) at home, boys are

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the parents believe. In several cases, children would fake "homework assignments that require computer with Internet access to do" to get their computers installed at home.

<sup>6</sup> A major concern among the parents of the interviewees is the eyesight damage through overuse of the computer.

<sup>7</sup> All of the interviewees, except one, have broadband service at home.

usually prioritized over girls in terms of computer access, regardless of the sibling orders. However, girls are equally active and aggressive in fighting for equal access to computer usage. For example, Irene and Jennie (both age 11) won their wars over computer usage by threatening to change their brother's password or to report their unauthorized playing to the parents. Girls show equally enthusiastic engagement in the games of their choices, and adopted just about as many strategies and tricks as boys did to achieve their aim. This is especially true for younger girls.

### **Playing at Internet Café** *Imagined "Dangerous space"*

In contrast to the possible image of home computers as "learning devices," computers in NetCafés are regarded as the "game machine," and NetCafés as the nouveau technological version of youth playgrounds. Although they became prevalent in Taiwan only in recent years, NetCafés have received disproportionately high exposure in local media. They are portrayed as the sunken dens of depravation where teenagers can't help but linger, and they are also portrayed in association with all kinds of Internet-related crimes and deviant behaviors. Such negative images cause moral panic not unlike the negative public reaction to the amusement arcade [4, 10].

The stigma of NetCafé is ubiquitous. Parents and schools place restrictions on minors to access NetCafés.<sup>8</sup> Various rumors about the detrimental influence of NetCafé are circulating among the gamers. The most intriguing ones told in the interviews are about the air conditioning in NetCafé.

*"The air conditioning [in NetCafé] is drugged, with heroin or something like that. So we inhaled, we got addicted, and we would then go buy the drugs [from them]."* (Joan, age 11)

*"NetCafé is bad for girls, because girls will have babies later and the air [in NetCafé] is bad for that."* (Craig, age 16)

NetCafé goers are fully aware of the negative images of the place they go, and a sense of self-surveillance can be detected in our conversation. They would come to "confess" or defense their NetCafé going behaviors out of the blue.

*"I just thought that I would play for only a little while, that should be OK, right?"* (Trevor, 26)

*"I don't think there is anything wrong with NetCafé, kids go there too. We all just go for fun. ....We are bad boys."* (Douglas, age 21)

As a matter of fact, most of interviewees did not consider NetCafés a nice or comfortable space. Typical description of the place is smoky, unsafe (e.g. passwords are likely to be stolen), with loud sound effects, and full of weird guys who seem to have no proper occupations. Minors who visit NetCafés have to worry about being caught on the spot by school teachers or found out later by their parents.<sup>9</sup> Then, the question is: why risk going at all? Better equipments, uninterrupted playing experience, convenience for the coordination and dispatching in group

<sup>8</sup> In terms of attitude toward NetCafés, all interviewees in our sample unanimously agreed that no parents would like to see their children going to NetCafé.

<sup>9</sup> Since the most distinguishable mark of visiting a NetCafé is that the smoke stays in hairs and clothes, several interviewees reported their ways of hiding the smell from parents: by splashing water on hair, using deodorant spray before returning home, or rushing to shower the first moment home.

actions, are among the list of reasons. Yet the sense of being with other players, running into or playing with friends was emphatically noted in the interviews.

*“The point is not playing online games, it is doing something together. ...you chat and play with friends.”* (Peggy, age 20)

*“There is such a lively feeling of gaming. Everybody around is playing, and you feel fine.”* (Coco, age 26)

Youngsters mobilize friends to go to NetCafés together. Compared with playing in the NetCafé with online friends, playing at home is less exciting, especially when no friends were present. However, girls have more restricted access to NetCafés than boys do. One mother who takes pride in her lenient policy on her son’s gaming in NetCafé<sup>10</sup> claimed that she would never adopted the same attitude toward girls if she had a daughter, because “girls need protection and boys need to venture out into the world.” (Betty, 48) As a stigmatized dangerous space, NetCafé is deemed not suitable for females. Girls fear to go there alone at night, or stay late. They express a general but uncertain fear about the environment, while boys complained only about the unpleasant interior. Girls do play online games, although in a relatively smaller number than boys, but when it comes to playing in public leisure space like NetCafés, the gender disparity of online gamers grows even wider.<sup>11</sup> NetCafés in Taiwan are predominately a male space.

## **Playing at Dormitory**

### *“Gendered space”*

Staying all night playing online games together in the dormitory is a common experience shared by many college students in Taiwan. As a gaming place, the student dormitory has two features. Firstly, it combines the advantages of both playing at home and in public NetCafé. Playing in dormitory is free of charge, the gamers feel comfortable with flexible playing schedule, and it is a social event. Secondly, dormitory is a gender segregated playing space.<sup>12</sup> As a result, we found a very different gaming culture in male student dormitories from that of female student dormitories.

In male student dormitories, online gaming is a very popular activity, and the playing usually has a highly competitive, performance-like atmosphere. Students from different rooms organize as teams to play against one another. Huge crowd is gathered to watch and cheers shouted as advancements made or victories won. Online team shooting/action games are the favorite type of game in such occasions. And those who did not play before have a good chance to watch and were often urged by friends to participate in the game. The highly competitive atmosphere of gaming is not inviting to the less skillful players, yet they tend to practice in private and join the game later when skill is improved. Therefore, living in male student dormitories provides an environment where the male students are granted more chances of playing games and accordingly they spend more time on game playing.

On the contrary, there are generally fewer online game layers in female student dormitories. Unlike their male counterparts who have reached a considerable size of population,

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<sup>10</sup> She paid for her son’s NetCafé expenses and checked on him hourly in the NetCafé.

<sup>11</sup> According to a survey of online gamers conducted in 2004 [6], females account for 41% of total gamers in Taiwan. However, the proportions of females in NetCafés are smaller, usually less than 20%.

<sup>12</sup> Almost all campus dormitories in Taiwan are for female or male students only.

female game players are less visible and keep a low profile in dormitories. As the minority group in dorms, they have to take more of other roommates' reactions to their playing into account. So, instead of inviting roommates to join them, they play when no one is around or turn down the volume of sound effect while playing games, "*because others don't play.*" In contrast to the competitive culture of male gaming, there is evidence suggesting a more supportive female culture of playing. For example, when Mabel (age 22) has to go to class, her roommate would help by playing her avatar to leveling it up.

### **MMORPGs: Games of Social Relations**

#### *For networking, of networking, by networking*

MMORPGs are socially oriented games. People play because their friends and family members play. Playing is also a way of associating with others in their daily life. If we take the social function away from the no storyline, open-ending games, playing MMORPGs would be like "*in an empty hell of everlasting leveling.*" Donald (age 20) started playing in the army. Being a gay, he felt unconnected to his fellow soldiers and indifferent to their obsessive talk about women. In order not to be isolated from his heterosexual fellows and create some common bond, he learned to play the popular online game. He quit playing not long after leaving the army when he no longer needed to play online game to create any particular bondage with anyone.

Trevor's story illustrates that the spirit of gaming is sharing with friends, rather than the fun of game itself. One of our interviewees, Peggy (age 20), considers "go shopping with friends" a similar activity as online game. Gideon (age 17) describes playing online game as "playing basketball with friends." For many players, the identity acquired through networking is much more important than the identity associated with any specific games. Friends pick not only the same game, but also the same server to play. When they graduated and enrolled in a new school, the network of close friend changed, so did their gaming activities. Some were willing to give up altogether the avatars they had raised for long time and shift to a new game or a new server. In other words, online gaming is not a personal preference, it is a social action.

### **Gendered Space, Gendered Gaming Experience**

#### *More restriction, less resources*

Playing online games in general, MMORPGs in particular, is a social activity, which needs both virtual and physical spaces for networking and sharing experiences. In domestic space, girls actively fight for their access to the game machine and gaming time, just as their brothers do. However, girls' access to public leisure space is restricted. Compared with their male counterparts, they have fewer chances to play on-line games and fewer co-players to share experience with,. The size of the playing circle in a peer group has significant implications on playing culture. Big circles of players could form peer pressure on non-players, whereas small circles usually means fewer resources and lonelier experience.<sup>13</sup> At last, male interviewees often consider that the killing-hacking-slashing nature of the online games is the reason girls do not like to play them.<sup>14</sup> In other words, from their points of view, girls choose not to play these masculine games. However, our findings challenge such explanation. Although girls do like games of cute style, no girls complained about the killing-hacking-slashing element in online

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<sup>13</sup> The significance of scale is evident in one rare case of the interviewed primary school girls. Since there were relatively many girls playing online games in the class at the beginning, one after another was drawn into playing. Finally all 15 girls in the class joined playing.

<sup>14</sup> This result agrees with the finding in Cassell and Jenkins' study of girl gamers [3].

games. Instead, girls do complain about not having enough girls to play with. In conclusion, we find that access to different gaming spaces plays a crucial role in shaping one's social experience of gaming.

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