The Hegemony of Play

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, we introduce the concept of a "Hegemony of Play," to critique the way in which a complex layering of technological, commercial and cultural power structures have dominated the development of the digital game industry over the past 35 years, creating an entrenched status quo which ignores the needs and desires of "minority" players such as women and "non-gamers," Who in fact represent the majority of the population. Drawing from the history of pre-digital games, we demonstrate that these practices have "narrowed the playing field," and contrary to conventional wisdom, have actually hindered, rather than boosted, its commercial success. We reject the inevitability of these power structures, and urge those in game studies to "step up to the plate" and take a more pro-active stance in questioning and critiquing the status of the Hegemony of Play.

Author Keywords
Games, game industry, gender, game production, game development, media production.

WHAT IS THE HEGEMONY OF PLAY?

The term "Hegemony of Play" was coined during an April 2005 lecture by play expert Bernie DeKoven at the Interactive Media program in USC's School of Cinematic Arts. During a heated debate following DeKoven's presentation, Ludica founders Fullerton and Pearce pointed out the ways in which the exclusionary power structures of the computer game industry have narrowed the conception of both play and player in the digital sphere. Those who rose to the defense of the industry cited the conventional wisdom that the design of digital games is entirely driven by the market for them. As the discussion progressed, it became clear that there are at least three levels of unexamined assumptions in this defense of the game industry's status quo. These assumptions are related to the production process and environment for the creation of digital games; to the evolution of technologies related to play; and to the cultural positioning of games and "gamers."

We have adopted the term "Hegemony of Play" in a non-ironic fashion to refer to the way in which the digital game industry has influenced the global culture of play in much the same way that hegemonic nations, such as the British Empire or post-WWII America, have, in their times of influence, dominated global culture. Today's hegemonic game industry has infused both individuals' and societies' experiences of games with values and norms that reinforce that industry's technological, commercial and cultural investments in a particular definition of games and play, creating a cyclical system of supply and demand in which alternate products of play are marginalized and devalued.

The power elite of the game industry is a predominately white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominated corporate and creative elite that represents a select group of large, global publishing companies in conjunction with a handful of massive chain retail distributors. This hegemonic elite determines which technologies will be deployed, and which will not; which games will be made, and by which designers; which players are important to design for, and which play styles will be supported. The hegemony operates on both monetary and cultural levels. It works in concert with game developers and self-selected hardcore "gamers," who have systematically developed a rhetoric of play that is exclusionary, if not entirely alienating to "minority" players (who, in numerical terms, actually constitute a majority) such as most women and girls, males of many ages, and people of different racial and cultural backgrounds. It is aided and abetted by a publication and advertising infrastructure, characterized by game review magazines, television programming and advertising that valorizes certain types of games, while it marginalizes those that do not fit the "hardcore gamer" demographic. These attitudes prevail, in spite of the fact that inclusiveness has produced some of the best-selling games in history, such as *Pac-Man, Myst*, and *The Sims*. The Hegemony of Play is the proverbial elephant in the living room, of which everyone is aware, but which no one calls by name. Some have critiqued it [2], [7], [12], but few have called attention to or questioned its underlying power structures and *raison d'etre* [6], [15], [23], [24].

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We would like to submit that play, an innate human practice and function, belongs to everyone, and in its digital incarnations should not be controlled by a hegemonic elite. We are calling for the game studies community to critique rather than adopt and perpetuate the rhetoric of the Hegemony of Play, and to explore new avenues of inclusiveness and diversity. As scholars and educators, it is our prerogative to do this; as designers and artists, our mandate. We believe that as both researchers and independent game designers, it is important to define and better understand this hegemony, because it drives the discourse of game studies, whether players and scholars realize it or not. Particular ways that the hegemony of play has had a role in shaping the trajectory of game studies include:

- Because we often study games that are created by the Hegemony of Play, we not only critique and analyze, but also often embrace, valorize, and fetishize the cultural production of the Hegemony of Play. Yet we seldom analyze or critique the power structures from which they emerge. These power structures shape us and our discourse, and it behooves us to be more reflexive about the ways in which they do.

- Because of its narrow market definitions, the Hegemony of Play has driven the critical discourse of what is and is not a game; games researchers have taken this up as a matter of taxonomy, but deeply embedded in these arguments have been inherent values of the *video game industry* that are not necessarily inherent qualities of games. Rigorous scholarship demands that we interrogate and critique these values and assumptions rather than taking them at face value.

- Due to the standard demographic of most video games, the vast majority of player-centered research, whether cognitive, behavioral, psychological or sociological, whether quantitative or qualitative, concerns male players; this fact is seldom, if ever, articulated. If the player gender is called out, it is not considered of consequence and generalizations are often made that pertain primarily or exclusively to male players. We would argue that it is important to articulate who the players are, and make it clear who is being included and excluded, for whatever reason.

- The notion of the "gamer" which has defined the rhetoric of game marketing and fandom, has created a sub-culture which is exclusionary and alienating to many people who play games, but who do not want to be associated with the characteristics and game play styles commonly associated with "hardcore gamers." This stereotype may actually *prevent* some people from playing games entirely. Anecdotally, we have found that female students, even those who spend over 20 hours per week playing videogames, are reluctant to term themselves "gamers" precisely because of these connotations. In addition, the market rationale of the gamer demographic has given the game industry free reign to exercise a wide variety of gender and racially discriminatory practices and stereotyping, in both the workplace and in the content they create, that would be unacceptable in any other field.

We are not trying to suggest that game publishers or developers are insincere. Rather we are trying to call attention to the power structures that surround game technologies, game production and game consumption. These power structures perpetuate a particular set of values and norms concerning games and game play, which tend to subordinate and ghettoize minority players and play styles. In fact, this status quo leaves many game developers themselves feeling disaffected and disheartened—they see the need for expanded markets, and also crave the opportunity for more creativity and innovation. Many designers bemoan the stranglehold that marketing departments have on the trajectory of game design. However, being trapped inside the power structures themselves, they have too much at stake to precipitate a revolutionary upheaval of the powers of play.

Our argument here, necessarily brief, will only introduce the basic areas in which these power structures may be found; more scholarship and critique is called for that is not possible in a paper of this length. The areas of crisis we have identified are: 1) the production process and environment for the creation of digital games; 2) the technologies of play, including the evolution of games from folk traditions and cultural artifacts to industrial products and intellectual property, and now to digital products and virtual societies; and 3) the cultural positioning of games and "gamers."

Finally we argue through historical precedent and recent scientific and marketing research that the alleged relationship between commercial success and these exclusionary rhetorics of "conventional wisdom" are in fact incorrect, and we make a case that had the game industry *not* engaged in these practices over the past thirty-five years, its market would be much larger, and its revenues much greater than they are today.

THE PRODUCTION ENVIRONMENT

In 2005, the International Game Developers Association commissioned a report and survey in order to understand the demographic make-up of the game development community. Its results were not surprising 88.5% of all game development workers are male; 83.3% are white; 92% are heterosexual. While the quantitative data culled in this study reinforced what most people who have been intimate with the game industry already knew, even more informative was the qualitative data collected in the comments ending the survey. Here are just a few examples from among the first 20 of over 1000 comments [11]:

«The industry is not diverse. The people interested in games and computers in general are not diverse. Most programmers are men - because men tend to like programming more often than women do. Its just the way it is.» - M, 24, White, Canada

«Games are made by White Males, for White Males. I'm all for a diverse industry, it just isn't there. Marketing in the entire industry is very poor. Games either make it or don't, then copy the ones that do.» - M, 28, USA

«I don't think workforce diversity has anything to do with making great games. Hiring should be based solely on skills, work ethic and personality. Race, gender, sexual orientation and ethnic background have NO bearing on hiring policy.» - M, 35, White, USA

«The most qualified person should be hired, beyond that I don't care what sexual preference, color, creed or any other pop culture label they are.» - M, 26, White, disabled, USA

Yet the very term "qualified," as defined by the game industry, is encoded to exclude experience in related areas, such as educational software, or other entertainment media such as film or theme parks. We have written elsewhere [16] about the workplace and cultural issues surrounding the need to attract more young women to the game industry, but even when women or game designers that represent minority play styles do enter the arena, it is often a struggle to create content that is outside the current definitions of successful game products. Brenda Laurel, an early game industry pioneer and co-founder of the Game Developers Conference reports:

Throughout my two decades in the computer game business, I had ached for the chance to create alternatives to the chasing, shooting, fighting, exploding, hyper-male world of games. Why weren't there any computer games for girls? And why did I end up losing my job every time I suggested it. It couldn't be just a sexist conspiracy. The boys' game industry generated billions of dollars; surely even the most virulent sexist in Silicon Valley would be perfectly happy to reap the corresponding millions from girls if he could figure out how to do it. Nor was the male culture of computer games simply an artifact of the history of the industry. Something more complex and subtle was going on, and I knew it had to do with the construction of gender in every aspect of our lives—in play, identity, work, technology, and business. [15]

Laurel was given just this opportunity in 1992, when she was invited by David Liddle to propose a project for the newly formed technology R&D Lab, Interval Research. The two engaged in a discussion about girls and games. Liddle's assessment? "There's a six billion dollar business with an empty lot next door." Liddle and Laurel "*...agreed if this were an easy problem, someone would have already solved it. In sum, it had all the characteristics of a good research problem—puzzling, consequential and complex."* This conversation lead to the birth of Purple Moon, an early venture into the "girl game" movement of the early 1990s. Beleaguered by poor support and marketing, Purple Moon had its plug pulled before being given adequate time to build an audience [15]. *Purple Moon* is often held up as an example as commercial failure that proves the rule. Little credence is given to the fact that it still had a small and adamant fan base even at its demise. *Purple Moon* was, in short, gobbled up by the Hegemony of Play.

The few women who do manage to break into the conventional male-dominated game–creation clubhouse must struggle with the prevailing culture. For instance, when successful female game producer Nour Polloni insisted that the female leading character in a new game wear baggy pants, she had difficulties negotiating with the all-male creative team, who wanted to dress her in a string bikini. [17] Virtually all of the women in the IGDA comments supplement complained of the "boys-only" ethos, and were well aware of game industry practices that are alienating to women. These include the use of "booth babes" at industry expos, excessive overtime, a lack of work/life balance, and a general locker-room attitude that pervades the workplace [11].

Remarkably, in spite of this, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reports that 38% of gamers are women [5]. Indeed, a number of recent studies have shown that -- in direct contradiction with the conventional wisdom of those who claim that games are designed in direct response to market opportunities -- women, and particularly women over forty, are the largest demographic for games. A study on casual games commissioned by AOL for instance, found that women over 40 spent the most time playing games of any demographic group [26]. Yet many in the game industry do not consider casual games to be "real" games and thus discount the growing influence of women in the games market.

Thus, it is clear that even though there *is* a market for "minority" players and play styles, the production environment of digital play is, for the most part, failing to address these players. It is also obvious that these minority players would, in fact, quickly become the *majority* of players were their desires addressed by the game industry. How to do this is a question that has been asked every so often by the industry as a passing fad, often met by failure because the standards of play and "gameness" that are applied to these products during their development and marketing are always those of these hegemonic structures. Many companies and designers have come away from attempts to reach these markets with the frustrated conclusion that it cannot be done, that only "gamers" play

games. But is there a larger picture here? Is it possible that the difficulty in producing "games for girls" or games for adults, or games for "everyone" lies in the inherent properties of the technology of digital games themselves? Or are these hegemonic practices tied more to the marketing and production process that has developed over the past three decades?

THE TECHNOLOGIES OF PLAY

Videogames, unlike the other game types that preceded them, represent a major shift in the role and power of the player vs. the product. In the playground, an elaborate ritual exists around negotiating and agreeing upon the rules of engagement [19], [4]. Most card games begin with a determination of what game will be played, and by which rules. Tabletop role-playing and strategy games are often accompanied by a Talmudic discourse of rules interpretation. All of these practices give players the ultimate power in determining how they shall play. It is clear, from the traditional game players' perspective, that while they may have purchased some specialized implements of play (such as a board with pieces or a deck of cards) that the "game" does not come in the box, but is in fact, an emergent experience "owned" in many ways by themselves and their fellow players. Changing the game, tweaking the rules, is always possible and "house rules" are a common staple.

Videogames on the other hand both dictate and enforce rules automatically through software. They also determine which play styles shall be favored and which skill sets shall be valorized, and create the unusual situation of a human matching his or her wits with a machine. Much of mastery in digital games entails ones ability to "beat" the computer on its own terms; this puts the player who either cannot do so, or has little interest in mastering the machine, at a decided disadvantage. It is as if all of chess players were required to play against IBM's famed Big Blue rather than matching wits against more fallible and infinitely more interesting human opponents. The result would be a generation of chess players trained to beat a machine. This notion of playing with machines has forever altered the concept of what a game is and has transformed players into game consumers. Rather than determining if a game is good enough for them, as Bernie DeKoven has proposed, players now must prove they are good enough for the game. [4]

The hardware technologies of games have also tended to advantage some forms of play while marginalizing others. Players who are not as adept, for instance, with a console controller, will be at a decided disadvantage. (Note that the size of the original Xbox controller was awkward for both women and children.) Recent studies have shown that due to cognitive differences between males and females, games that demand a high level of certain types of spatial rotation skills, such as First Person Shooters, are actually more difficult for women and girls to master [25]. By automating these features and not allowing the player to modify or alter for skills and play preferences, videogames create an artificial boundary that often precludes the kind of "house rules" adaptation that have been available throughout the course of game history.

This approach to play is not inevitable; it is, rather, an outgrowth of the way in which various technologies have constructed our expectations of play, our ownership of the games we participate in, and our relationship to other players. By technologies, we mean more than merely digital technologies. The transition from folk games, to industrial games, to digital games has involved technologies dating back to the printing press, and the assembly line. Before the invention of the printing press, for example, there were many variations of chess played throughout both the Eastern and Western worlds. Some involved dice, others a King that could leap over other pieces [21]. The early chessboard featured a vizier, which during the Age of Discovery and the rein of Queen Isabella, evolved into the powerful Queen piece we see today [27]. As the powers of Europe began to consolidate in the 16th century, so too did the rules of chess -- printed and distributed as canon using the most revolutionary technology of the day. What McLuhan and others have called an "alphabetic monopoly" created by the technology of the printing press changed the multifaceted nature of the games collectively called "chess," and modern chess -- a standard set of pieces and rules -- was born.

The 19th and Early 20th Century Board Game Industry as a Model for the Future?

While no one "owns" chess, the printing press would change the "folk" nature of games, and in doing so, change players' relationship to the games they played. Where games had once been flexible cultural traditions, moving from player to player, region to region, absorbing new rules, changing others, adapting to the immediate needs of players without concern for consistency or commercial value, now, they would become reproducible social artifacts. It is not until the dawn of the industrial revolution however, that games begin a more dramatic evolution from reproducible social artifacts to commercial products. Board and card games epitomized the industrial revolution in America in a number of significant ways. First, they were a response to the opportunity afforded by leisure time, a new phenomenon of the middle class in late 19th Century America; they were in a sense the first form of "home entertainment." Second, they took advantage of emerging mass production methods and personnel. Third, their marketing strategies and content provides unique insight into the cultural concerns of the day [8]. A survey of early games from the "golden age of board games," roughly the mid 1800s to the 1920s, prior to the introduction of radio, shows the ways in which the game industry was both more inclusive and in many respects more culturally relevant than the video game industry is today.

While much is made of the economic success of the video game industry, now estimated to be around $7 billion for software alone [5], its revenues pale in comparison to those of board games. *The Sims* franchise, for instance, has sold 60 million copies worldwide, and is the best-selling videogame of all time. Though unique in its cross-gender appeal, these figures are dwarfed by the estimated 750 million units of Monopoly sold worldwide. Granted Monopoly has had a longer period to accrue this figure, an example of what Chris Anderson calls a "long tail," [1] while many popular video games seem to have chronically short shelf-lives. Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine *any* video game rivaling these sales figures, even given a longer gestation period. This comparison begs the question: Why don't video games sell *more*? A survey of the history and culture of the board game provides a stark contrast to that of computer games, demonstrating how the video game industry has represented, in many ways, a major setback for play as a component of everyday life, for people of every age, race, gender, and socio-economic class.

Although most of the early board game companies were owned and run by men, women played an integral part in the emerging culture of board games at every level. In fact, the 19th Century board game industry actually had a higher percentage of female contributors than today's digital game business. Significantly, two early and influential board games were designed by women. The first known American board game, *The Mansion of Happiness*, was designed by Anne Abbott of Beverly, Mass, a clergyman's daughter, also inventor of the *Authors,* a literary card game played by the characters in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women,* which remained popular into the 1960s. Originally published by The W. & S.B. Ives Company of Salem, Mass, it was re-published in 1894 by Parker Bros. A major commercial success*, Mansion of Happiness* was a typical genre of the day: a game that taught life lessons. (Figure 1) Players attempted to reach the Mansion of Happiness at the center of the board by traversing squares of virtue, such as Honesty and Temperance, and avoiding temptation, such as Poverty and Perjury [8], [18].

Figure 1: The Mansion of Happiness was the first board game published in America; a smash hit, it was later re-released by Parker Bros. (shown) (From the Liman Collection at New York Historical Society. Used with permission.)

The first board game ever to be awarded a patent was also designed by a woman, Lizzie Magie, who originally patented *The Landlord Game* in 1904 and again in 1924. (Figure 2)

Magie owned the patent until 1935 when it was purchased by Parker Brothers to make way for their upcoming hit *Monopoly,* attributed to Charles Darrow, which would become the best-selling board game of all time. Unlike *Monopoly*, *The Landlord Game* was actually an anti-capitalism activist game designed to demonstrate how tenants were exploited by land-owners [18], a theme that today might class it in the genre of "games for change."

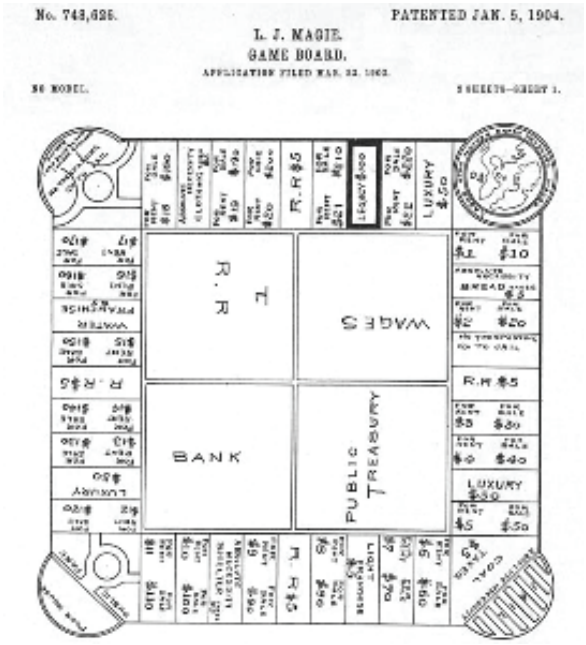

Figure 2: Lizzie Magie's 1924 patent for *The Landlord Game.* (Image Source: Wikimedia commons, public domain.)

The titles of games published during this period (roughly 1860-1920) suggest a rich array of themes and gameplay options. Here are just a few examples*: The Game of Department Store* (McLoughlin Bros 1898) where players try to run and manage their own store*; The New Pretty Village*, a paper house building set whose box features a mother overseeing her young son and daughter creating a town together (McLoughlin Bros. 1890*); Feast of Flowers: A Floral Game of Fortune*, one of numerous fortune-telling games (Adams & Co 1869); and the Grandmama's series that included trivia, riddle, history and literature games (McLoughlin Bros.). Courtship games abounded, such as the *Elite Social and Sentimental Conversation Cards*, which allowed players to construct dialogues such as: "Q: Have you ever been in love? A: Why not? I am human." Or Q: "Are you inclined to boss the house? A: Quite the reverse." (McLoughlin Brothers 1887; Figure 3) There was a game integrated into a sewing kit; and even the highly masculine *Rough Rider Ten-Pins* included a female cowgirl character (R. Bliss 1898) [8].

While the people represented on the boxes of these games were generally white and middle class, they spanned both genders and a wider range of ages than do typical video game packaging and ads of today. The convention of showing *people playing* the game used on the packaging of the period provides some insight into the way in which the "technology" of the board games influenced their players and their role in society. *The Sociable Telephone—A Game for the Smart Set*, designed to teach etiquette for the new communications technology, features a smiling Victorian lady (Parker Bros. 1902); and the box cover for the stock market game *Commerce* shows a woman holding a trading card high up in the air. (J. Ottoman & Lith 1900) (Figure 3) Ads for *Pillow-Dex*, an indoor sport utilizing a kind of balloon, show Victorian ladies in full regalia knocking the object into the air. (Parker Bros. 1897) [18] (Figure 4) While there are currently no videogames based on women's sports, the board game industry of over 100 years ago, in recognition of the game's popularity among both men and women, created *The Game of Basket Ball* with an all-female cast. (Chaffee & Selchow & McLoughlin Bros. 1898) [8]

Figure 3: *Commerce* (Ottoman & Lith 1900) (From the Liman Collection at the New York Historical Society. Used with permission)

Figure 4: Typical of packaging of the day, Pillow-Dex shows multiple generations enjoying the game. (From the Liman Collection at the New York Historical Society. Used with permission)

One of the most intriguing and little-known aspects of the early board game industry was the predominance of women in the production process. The following account, *from The Game-Makers*, a history of Parker Brothers, sets the stage for what would come to be called "The Pastime Girls," after Pastime Puzzles, the jigsaw division of the company [18]:

> *There was no set pattern or "die" to make endless copies. It took the artistic skill of a single operator to make the cuts, following the impulses that caused a pair of hands to maneuver plywood creatively against a rapidly moving French-made blade. To enter the jigsaw market, the brothers needed operators who had the right touch to attractively and precisely cut such puzzles. Fortunately, a local industry held an abundance of the needed talent. Skill at stitching seemed to mark the skill needed to cut out a jigsaw puzzle. The New England region was known for its shoe making, and shoe making required an abundance of stitchers (who were mainly women).*

These female factory workers, who were expected to cut 1,400 pieces per day, provide an intriguing picture of an altogether different game development environment:

> *As a Pastime Girl became more experienced, it was less exciting to cut pieces at random, and became of matter of honor to cut some pieces with recognizable shapes. These became known as figurals – pieces resembling letters, numbers, animals, common objects, and symbols. It was not unusual to find a puzzle with an "H," a "5," a fox, a wheelbarrow, and a heart among its pieces. The novelty of these figurals was deemed sufficient to apply for a patent (taken out in the name of the department foreman).* [18]

Figure 5: George Parker playtesting a new game with the "Pastime Girls." [18]

Female factory workers were called into service assembling and hand-painting board games, such as the re-release of *Mansion of Happiness*, which George Parker demanded be

true to the original. As a result of their role in manufacturing and their ready availability, these "Gibson Girls" were also recruited for playtesting Parker's new inventions. In a 1905 scrapbook photo

> *George is seen playing cards with three similarly attired women from his office – their blouses white and puffy, their skirts long and pinched at the waist, their hair neatly piled atop their heads. These ladies exemplified the "Gibson girl" style, which remained in vogue for three decades…* [18] (Figure 5)

This is a radically different picture from the typical playtesting department of today's videogame industry, peopled by Mountain Dew™-guzzling young men just out of high school or college. It is interesting to hypothesize what today's videogame industry would look like had its products been playtested entirely by women. Would *Doom* have managed to be published with no female characters, if at all? Would early video games be romantic, literary, artistic? Would they revolve around themes such as botany, fashion, fortunes, life lessons, sociability or sewing? What greater diversity might have emerged had the game-creators and testers themselves been more diverse?

THE CULTURAL POSITIONING OF PLAYERS AND PLAY

As many who have been in or adjacent to it since the last century will attest, the game industry has gone through several historical phases to arrive at its present hegemonic power structure, which was not, as some would suggest, a foregone conclusion. Indeed, the very success of the game industry, and the dedication of its core players to an increasingly narrow definition of games and gameplay are to blame in part for the development of the current situation. As the game industry has become more successful, with a few exceptions, it has become more risk-averse, and more oriented to what it defines as its "core market."

This core market is often referred to as "hardcore gamers," a term that has come to mean not only a person who games, but also a particular type of person who plays particular types of games. This gamer persona has become "ground zero" from the perspective of game design and marketing, and is taken by industry as the "de facto" target demographic for its goods. It is characterized by an adolescent male sensibility that transcends physical age and embraces highly stylized graphical violence, male fantasies of power and domination, hyper-sexualized, objectified depictions of women, and rampant racial stereotyping and discrimination. Co-author Fullerton has astutely referred to this male gamer persona as "the third gender." Although this is not meant in a literal sense, it points to the fact that the game industry has constructed an entirely new fictional variation of Simone De Beauvoir's subjective male, one which may have as little to do with the majority of men as it does with women. De Beauvior's argument of the male subjective position as normative and central, and the female position as "other," as object [3], has changed significantly in many respects of society since the time of her writing in the 1950s. However, as "gamers," women still inhabit a "masculine universe:"

> *Sometimes the "feminine world" is contrasted with the masculine universe, but [women…] form an integral part of the group which is governed by males and in which they have a subordinate place.* [3]

While the third gender has some relationship to what Lars Konzack describes as the rise of "The Third Culture," that of the "Geek," it differs in a few significant respects. The "Geek" described by Konzack implies counter-culture, as characterized by *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek* fan culture, Live-Action Role Playing Games (LARPs), MUDs and MOOs; he further points out that women are actively contributing to the third culture as both authors and participants, notably in LARPs, cosplay, fan fiction communities, as well as establishing the Game Grrls phenomenon and female fan networks. [13] Conversely, mainstream gamer culture has been commoditized and commercialized, packing the shelves of American retailers such as Walmart and Best Buy and influencing television commercials on U.S. Cable TV channels such as *G4, Spike TV* and *Comedy Central*. Far from counter-culture Geekdom, the "gamer" is a self-fulfilling prophecy, a highly commoditized market demographic that follows precisely the pattern dictated by the industry by which it has been constructed.

This third gender can be epitomized by a conversation between Pearce and an executive of a major game company. In response to the recommendation from his marketing director that he speak to her about creating games for girls, he quipped: "Our job is to take lunch money away from 14-year-old boys." Pearce found this characterization equally insulting to both boys and girls, but exhibited in particular a manipulative, cynical and exploitive position toward its treasured target market. During that same visit, Pearce observed a group of said lunchless 14-year-old boys, who, the executive gloated, were conducting playtesting for the firm for free. [20] Playtesters are indeed a major part of the perpetuation of the Hegemony of Play. The entry level position on the game board of a career in videogames, the criteria for being a playtester is to be a "gamer;" anyone who does not fall into the conventional category, gender notwithstanding, is by definition ineligible. In other words, "non-gamers (i.e. those not of the third gender) need not apply."

A number of designers and authors, the majority of whom are women, have commented upon the Hegemony of Play. Among them are Brenda Laurel [15], as well as Sheri Grainer Ray [7]. T.L. Taylor [23], [24] Mary Flanagan [6] and the editors and contributors to the collections *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* [2] and *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* [12]. Nina Huntemann in her lecture *Play Like a Man*, points out that the culture and representations

of video games are as damaging to men as they are to women:

> *These games, which utilize the cutting edge of computer technology, send very particular messages about what it means to be a man. Significantly, the overwhelming lesson about masculinity is that violence is the preferred means for accomplishing goals, resolving conflict and even for creating and maintaining interpersonal relationship with women*. [10]

She also points out that U.S. video games are predominately advertised on TV with a majority male viewers: *World Wresting Federation* and the *SciFi Channel* (60% male) being just two examples, as well as gaming magazines such as *Computer Gaming World* and *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, whose readership is 5% or less female. [10] Many videogame advertisements tend to disenfranchise and alienate women, further contributing to the self-fulfilling prophecy that "women don't play games." Looking at the examples featured in Figure 6, one scarcely wonders why.

Figure 6: Examples of video magazine game advertisements.

Representation of women is symptomatic of a much larger problem: the games themselves are unwelcoming to those not considered "gamers." Indeed in many respects the digital playground is shut off to "minority" players entirely, whether in terms of game creation, game technologies, or game play, whether merely in terms of creating domains that are exclusively male, or through discriminating or alienating practices of players themselves.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

While at this particular historical moment, the Hegemony of Play is the dominant force in the cultural production of games, we are beginning to see signs of subtle but tectonic shifts. This paper was written on the heels of the console frenzy of Christmas 2006, also at a time when the Internet has afforded an alternative distribution channel whose impact is only beginning to be understood. Sony and Microsoft placed their bets on the fervent loyalty of "gamers" in search of higher polygon counts of the same fare with their Playstation 3 and Xbox 360 repsectively. the number 3 console maker is staging a quiet revolution. Few paid notice to the re-branding of the "Gameboy" to the "DS" that took place in 2004. Yet advertising campaigns, in addition to the name-change, showed Nintendo setting its sights on a new population of players. (Figure 7) With the release of its new Wii console system,, Nintendo has stated openly and unabashedly, and demonstrated with both its new product development efforts and advertising campaigns, that it intends to diverge from the "path of least resistance" and follow in the footsteps of George Parker to return game-playing to a more inclusive activity that embraces diverse interests and embraces the whole family.

Figure 7: A French ad campaign for the DS Lite.

With the release of games such as *Brain Age, Nintendogs* and *Elektroplankton* for the DS, and a whole new interface paradigm along with a range of new game concepts for the Wii, it's clear that Nintendo is moving away from its competitors to open previously untapped markets. The Wii, originally called "Revolution," may in fact truly represent one; it may be as significant as the Model T Ford in creating "videogames for the people." Recent Wii

advertising campaigns harkening back to board game packaging of old show a diverse array of players engaging primarily with each other, rather than screenshots showing off graphics, as is the common practice with other systems. (Figure 7) Nintendo, once the undisputed giant of the game industry, has turned its back seat position in the Hegemony of Play into an asset. Rather than racing to create the fanciest graphics with the same old game mechanics, Nintendo has bet on new audiences and accessible game play, cultivating an audience of girls, women, adults and Baby Boomers, in other words, everyone *except* the "gamer" demographic described above.

Figure 7: Assorted pre-release ads for the Nintendo Wii.

It may turn out to be a pretty good bet, as Nintendo is the only one of the three console companies currently turning a profit on its new system. [22] Nintendo has even taken the unprecedented step of setting up a booth at the annual convention of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), boldly breaking barriers of both age and gender. [14] With an estimated 70 million Baby Boomers moving towards retirement, it's clear that Nintendo hopes to attract new markets beyond the traditional "gamer." And, while Nintendo is nothing if not entrenched in the game industry, having built much of it, the release of these innovative new products and marketing strategies speaks to a changing vision of play that is both inclusive and, apparently, profitable [22].

CONCLUSION

Earlier, we asked why it was that video games do not make more money, why it was that they have been unable to reach the wider audiences of traditional and classic games. Having explored several aspects of the multilayered power structures, environmental, technological and cultural, that have dominated the development of the digital game industry, we hope that we have taken a first step to a broader understanding of how games in general, and digital video games in particular, need not cater to a hypothetical niche audience of "gamers."

We are all gamers, and by looking back at earlier models of games and play, as well as critiquing both exclusionary production processes and cultural stereotypes of "gamers" and "non-gamers" we can create a non-hegemonic game industry that provides playful products which appeal to both men and women, children and adults, and players of all races, ages and personal play styles. Far from being a commercial death knell to the video game industry, such a focus can actually serve to expand the game market to be more diverse, inclusive and welcoming across a broader demographic range.

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