Running Head: MARGINALISING WOMEN IN FIRST PERSON SHOOTER VIDEO GAME
COMMUNITIES

Fight like a Girl – Marginalising Women in First Person Shooter Video

Game Communities

Melissa-Sue Pettit

Curtin University

Abstract

First-person shooters (FPS) are seen as the domain of male hard-core gaming enthusiasts but as half the population of gamers are women, more and more are starting to take up this genre of gaming. However, being dominated by male players, women have a difficult time shaking stereotypical roles and facing up to the more controlling masculine team mates. This paper investigates, gender roles, gendered communication and skill levels to show that women are finding it a tough battle to find their place as a gamer in the FPS community.

Fight like a Girl – Marginalising Women in First Person Shooter Video Game

Communities

Women who play first person shooter (FPS) games are considered the atypical rather than the norm. They are not normally welcomed into a squad or considered a valuable player. For this reason, they find it difficult to fit in and find their identity within FPS communities which are traditionally dominated by men. According to (Brand, Todhunter, & Jervis, 2017) around 46% of gamers in Australia are women, this figure is also very similar to America (ESA, 2018) and other western cultures where video game and online access is available. Women make up nearly half the population of the gaming community. While the games they play vary, with a majority playing casual games online, around 20-25% play first-person shooter video games or hard-core video games (Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017).

For the purposes of this paper we will be mainly looking at games that involve player vs environment and are first-person shooters. Games which fit with these characteristics are *Call of Duty, Rainbow Six Siege, Counterstrike* and *Overwatch*. These games can be played on a variety of devices and are all available to play in player vs environment mode and have online multiplayer modes which allow players to work in teams.

Women are subjected to marginalization in these communities for a variety of reasons. Forward we will look at three reasons that women find it hard to fit into these communities and what factors contribute to this. Those reasons include gender roles they

are expected to maintain from the offline world, gendered communication issues and being viewed as less valuable team members due to perceived lower skill level and ability. To get a better idea of why gender matters we should first examine what an FPS game is.

First person shooter (FPS) games are categorized as being games where the action is viewed from the point of view of the player's avatar/character whereas third person shooters are categorized by the action being viewed from behind the player's avatar/character. While these are two styles of gameplay are distinctly different in terms of where the player views their avatar/character, some gameplay does cross over, and multiplayer modes are available for both styles. FPS games are typically violent in nature. They have an array of weapons and arsenal at the disposal of the player in order to meet their goals. The types of themes and gameplay of a FPS can be stereotypically attributed to boys play and are generally aimed at fulfilling young men's fantasies (Hayes, 2005). It is interesting to point out here that most game developers are male, with only 21% of the worlds game developers being female (Statistica, 2019). Much of the gaming world is dominated by men developing games for men so this assumption could be why women who play FPS games are an abnormality.

Games of this nature can and do have different levels of participation. Players can play solo/story or multiplayer/squad modes as well as player vs player or player versus environment. Player vs environment is more likely to involve collaborative game play where players work to defeat their environment to achieve the common goal. Player vs

player is less collaborative as players are pitted against one another in order to be the last player standing or the first to complete the prescribed goal. Typically, FPS have a military, apocalyptic or science fiction themes which involve meeting a target or completing a mission.

Moreover, the concepts of FPS games are against the stereotypical ideals we hold about women, especially societal views that women themselves observe and comply with in order to conform to in the offline world. There is a gender bias whereby male playable characters are more often suited to the game having better weaponry and armour as well as having bigger roles in the storylines. Hayes (2005) discusses a participant in her research who has trouble finding character to play and eventually chooses a healer over a combatant character only to discover that this was not to her liking and chosen due to her core ideals of women being nurturing healers. Healers are also traditionally a support role character rather than a character who will lead a team to victory such as a commander or knight.

Women in FPS games are generally seen by others as having a support role rather than that of a leadership role becoming a subservient player in the game rather than a teammate who can facilitate ideas and plans in order to take the team to victory. This is explained by Holz Ivory, Fox, Franklin Waddell, and Ivory (2014), "men are dominant and are concerned with agentic goals, women are submissive and are oriented toward communal goals". This view then squarely puts women in the role of support character while men are dominant, and more goal focused and taking on lead characters. These

ideals make it unlikely that women could be taken seriously or even as a contemporary when formulating a game plan as a team. It could make her ideas seem inconsequential and invaluable and eventually being dismissed. Cotes (2017) describes 5 coping strategies employed by women to not only avoid harassment but also to be included and part of the game. One such strategy is developing skills and experience in order to be taken seriously as a contemporary player.

In many of the FPS games the characters themselves are undesirable options for women to pick. Many female characters are scantily clad with exaggerated features and often with much less clothing than their male counterpart characters. They can be very sexualized, thereby again having been developed for the core base of players, young men. In story lines they are often portrayed as victims and are in need of saving. This may in turn force women to choose a male character to represent her over a female character, even though she may not wish to. This can allow for anonymity and a feeling of being just like the other players. However, in multiplayer FPS games there is generally a requirement to talk in order to collaborate and make plans so invariably a female player will eventually give herself up as being female as soon as she enters conversation with others.

Communication is another area which is particularly problematic for female players. Due to gendered communication, it is often mistaken or taken the incorrect way. Holz Ivory et al. (2014), explain that communication through online chat in the FPS will revert to offline stereotypical views we hold of men and women. Men being more

dominant are more prone to aggressive and negative comments in order to get others to comply where as women are more encouraging and use positive comments in order to comply. While Cote (2017) observed some women change their communication and play styles to aggressive behaviours which was a coping mechanism employed by female gamers.

In an investigation by Holz Ivory et al. (2014) it was found that women received more friend request and acceptances than their male counterparts. This was attributed to the possibility that "male players seeking self-enhancement and flaunting their sexual prowess, particularly in the company of other male players". Women may feel uncomfortable with accepting friend requests because it can open them up to harassment and abuse on a personal level rather than in full view of the gaming community.

Easpaig (2018), discusses gender-based harassment of women, during communication, in video game communities. Flaming of female players included, sexual and derogatory comments made about them, there is even websites dedicated to sharing the abusive comments female gamers receive online. Women often will use strategies such as not communicating through voice chat or pretending their chat equipment is faulty, which can hinder collaboration with other players to reach their teams goals. This can severely limit their inclusion into the game as a team. Due to the quick nature of FPS games it is unlikely that players communicate through text chat so not being able to communicate verbally can be problematic to being a valuable player to the team. This is also backed up by Cote (2017) who also discusses that leaving, avoiding and blocking are

all coping strategies employed by women gamers in order to combat abusive comments and harassment.

Many teams are reliant on the skills their players have in their team. Some FPS will organise players randomly while other times you may have the option to choose your friends. Regardless of the set up of your team, in order to succeed in FPS a certain level of skill is required which requires many replays of the game itself in order to practice and women play for less time than men. It has been suggested that women have less time than men to spend on video games due to other practicalities of their lives. In other words they do not choose not to invest their time but rather are forced not to because of circumstance (Paaßen et al., 2017). In a three-year study conducted by Jenson and Castell (2011) they found that many young girls had little exposure to video game consoles unless they had and father, uncle, brother or other male figure who had exposed them to these. At the beginning of the study many girls were unable to even set up a console to play games and stated that other members of the family such as their brothers dominated the console usage. By the end of the study the girls were much more confident in using the video game consoles and even enjoyed playing games with other players.

FPS games are in general a game in which hard-core gamers are associated with and players have a lot of experience playing. In their paper Hopp and Fisher (2017) found that as FPS games require substantial skill in order to win, men are more likely to not let lack of skill deter them from the game. On the other hand, women are much more likely to see this as a problem to their advancement and enjoyment of the game. This

could be possibly because, according to Holz Ivory et al. (2014) women are more likely to be seen as weaker players regardless of their skill level by other players in the game. This is partly due to the assumption that men spend more time playing video games and are more likely to be hard core gamers. Obviously, more time playing video games equates to more skill. So, women who are playing for less time and being associated as "casual gamers" are seen as having limited skill regardless if this is untrue or not.

The implications of this perceived lack of skill and less frequent playing time can mean that women are again perceived as not being valuable to the team and are avoided or even abused or harassed. Or worse still the team could completely ostracise her and complete the game without her involvement at all. Bad experiences with teams could lead to women slipping out of playing this genre entirely which Cote (2017) also discusses as a coping strategy.

In conclusion, we have identified three issues which make women feel marginalised in the FPS environment and community. Firstly, women are less likely to be seen as dominant players capable of leading their teams to victory. This is due in part to the stereotypical gender roles that are prevailing from the offline world and being observed to in the online world. They are seen as having more support roles rather than being valuable equal members of the team, as well as being portrayed that way in the form of avatars and characters. Secondly, women find it difficult to communicate due to communication gender differences and being the victims of harassment, such as flaming which are also stereotypical norms from the offline world. Lastly, because women are

seen as having less skill due to being associated with casual gaming rather than hard core gaming they are often considered as not an asset to their team. Women are marginalised in this type of gaming community due to factors mainly relating to stereotypical views of what a gamer of this genre should look and act like. By not conforming women are more often than not harassed and pushed out of this gaming environment or it forces them to incorporate elaborate strategies to try to conform to what society perceives as the norm just to try and fit in. This makes for a very uncomfortable experience within this gaming genre but until stereotypical norms change, and more women are perceived as hard-core gamers with definite skill it is unlikely that women will identify as part of this genre's gamers.

References

Brand, J. E., Todhunter, S., & Jervis, J. (2017). Digital Australia 2018. Retrieved from

https://www.igea.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Digital-Australia-2018-DA18-

Final-1.pdf

Cote, A. C. (2017). "I can defend myself": women's strategies for coping with

harassment while gaming online. *Games and Culture*, 12(2), 136–155.

doi:10.1177/1555412015587603

Easpaig, B. N. G. (2018). An exploratory study of sexism in online gaming communities:

Mapping contested digital terrain. *Community Psychology in Global Perspective*,

4(2), 119-135. doi:10.1285/i24212113v4i2p119

ESA. (2018). Essential facts about the computer and video game industry. Retrieved from

http://www.theesa.com/about-esa/essential-facts-computer-video-game-industry/

Hayes, E. (2005). Women, video gaming and learning: beyond stereotypes. *TechTrends*,

49(5), 23-28. doi:10.1007/BF02763686

Holz Ivory, A., Fox, J., Waddell, T. F., & Ivory, J. (2014). Sex role stereotyping is hard

to kill: A field experiment measuring social responses to user characteristics and

behavior in an online multiplayer first-person shooter game. *Computers in Human

Behavior*, 35, 148-156. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2014.02.026

Hopp, T., & Fisher, J. (2017). Examination of the relationship between gender,

performance, and enjoyment of a first-person shooter game. *Simulation &

Gaming*, 48(3), 338-362. doi:10.1177/1046878117693397

Jenson, J., & Castell, S. (2011) Girls@Play, *Feminist Media Studies*, 11(2), 167-179,

DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2010.521625

Paaßen, B., Morgenroth, T., & Stratemeyer, M. (2017). What is a true gamer? The male

gamer stereotype and the marginalization of women in video game culture. *Sex

Roles*, 76(7-8), 421-435. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0678-y

Statistica. (2019). Global game developer gender 2017. Retrieved from

https://www.statista.com/statistics/453634/game-developer-gender-distribution-

worldwide/222w22aw23