# The Road to Gamergate: The History of Gender Stereotyping

# In Video Game Culture, 1970-2000 and Beyond

By

Thomas M. Derr

A Dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School - Newark

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Program in History

Federated Department of History at Rutgers University - Newark and NJIT

Written under the direction of

Elizabeth R. Petrick, Ph.D.

and

Kyle Riismandel, Ph.D.

And approved by

_____

Newark, NJ

October, 2020

**ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

The Road to Gamergate: The History of Gender Stereotyping In Video Game Culture,

1970-2000 and Beyond

By THOMAS M. DERR

Dissertation Director:

Elizabeth R. Petrick, PH.D.

Computer technology has not always been dominated by men. Prior to 1984, women earning computer science degrees skyrocketed to nearly 37%. After this peak, the numbers dwindled down to just 17% by 2012. What happened here?

This paper tells the story of how women grew to become more and more marginalized not only from computing, but from the culture of video games that would become extremely popular as home computers became more available to the public. This story traces how gender roles and stereotypes go on to gatekeep women from participating in video game and computer culture from the 1970s and well into the 2000s and beyond. This gatekeeping is perpetuated through the attitudes and perspectives of men who were typically the developers of computer hardware, software and video games. Public attitudes on violence and sexuality also contributed to the stereotyping of both young boys and girls, which was further reinforced through the narratives of the media. This story aims to provide agency to the voices of female gamers who were overlooked in their contemporary culture as well as in the vast history of video games.

Preface and Acknowledgements

I cannot begin to express my thanks to two very inspirational individuals of whom without their guidance this paper would not have been possible. First, my advisor Elizabeth Petrick, Ph.D., of which has been the backbone of this project. Without her unwavering dedication and instruction in helping me step-by-step on this journey, I am not sure I would have been able to finish. Secondly, I must recognize Christina Strasburger for her undying support in me through possibly one of the most marvelous and frightening journeys of my life. You both have been rocks for me during this endeavour and I am eternally indebted to you both.

I am also grateful to Kyle Riismandel, Ph.D. for his willingness and enthusiasm to sub-advise me on my paper. His energy and knowledge helped me stay motivated and open-minded to change while this paper came to life.

Special thanks to Thomas McCabe, Ph.D. for encouraging me to combine my passion for video games and history to produce this thesis. Without him this paper simply would not exist.

I wish to recognize every single professor and educator in the Federated Department of History at Rutgers University-Newark and NJIT for giving me a home away from home for the past three years. I would not be a fraction of the person I am today without the impact of each and every person belonging to this massive cohort I call family.

And lastly I want to thank my sister Julia Derr for her endless encouragement and support during the past few years. Whether it was driving 10 hours to and from an archive for research to helping me organize my seemingly endless documents, she has been an irreplaceable resource for me in more ways than anyone will ever know.

# Table of Contents

# Introduction: Press Start to Play

I vividly remember the days during my childhood in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s when my sisters and cousins (who happened to be all female) would crowd around my Nintendo 64 with me and play games like *Mario Tennis*, *Super Smash Bros.*, and *Pokemon Stadium* for hours on end. We made so many memories that would eventually become stories of nostalgia shared at family gatherings for decades to come. As we grew up, I noticed that I would end up receiving the newest game console during the holidays while my sister would receive books and the latest music device like the iPod. I have owned pretty much every console on the market at one point or another; meanwhile my sister has not had a single one of her own, until very recently. This was not because she disliked gaming; rather its a reflection of the imposed gender stereotypes attached to video games. These stereotypes would lead to an uneven representation within gaming culture that becomes more recognizable once video games go online. Due to this, it is no coincidence that if you boot up your favorite gaming console today and enter the online arena you are often engaging with parties full of men. It's not that women are not playing games, rather it's that they tend to be under-represented in gaming culture and technological communities by having their roles and skills defined for them. This masculine domination of technology created a lack of technological and intellectual agency for women interested in computer science and other related technological fields such as playing and designing video games. This thesis will analyze the discrimination of women in video game culture through gender stereotyping and how these perceptions

were manifested and perpetuated through ignorant and gendered marketing strategies

which went on to further separate women from technology.

Gaming started its entrance into the social atmosphere in the early 1970s with

titles such as *Computer Space* by Nutting Associates in 1971, followed by what would be

considered the first commercially successful video game, *Pong* by Atari in 1972.  These

games ignited a cultural revolution around redefining what gaming was, evidenced by

Atari becoming the fastest growing American company with revenues reaching nearly

two billion dollars a year.[1]  As with any developing culture, there are a variety of

questions that rise along with it.  The most important in this case being: who was  playing

the games?  The answer to this is more complex than we would like to think.  Sure,

anyone can walk up to a *Pac-Man* cabinet and play it, but the socialization of gender

roles related to gaming were quietly constructed through game development, marketing

strategies, and the consumer culture of gaming in physical and online spaces.  As gaming

shifted from public spaces, such as arcades, into the home, so did marketing strategies

and practices.  In order to reach their new markets, marketing teams initially targeted the

family as the main consumer base for early home video game consoles, using images of

nuclear families to suggest its "fun for the whole family."[2]  As the capabilities of

technology expanded, marketing grew more and more gendered toward both boys and

men as opposed to girls and women or the family.  Action, adventure, and first-person

---

[1] Kent, Steven L. *The Ultimate History of Video Games: from Pong to Pokémon and beyond: the Story behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World.* New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2001, 38.

[2] Kate Willaert, "Pixels In Print (Part 2): Advertising Odyssey – The First Home Video Game – Video Game History Foundation," Video Game History Foundation Pixels In Print Part 2 Advertising Odyssey The First Home Video Game Comments, March 20, 2020, https://gamehistory.org/magnavox-odyssey-advertisement-history/.

shooters (FPS) games all became associated with masculinity; meanwhile girls were fading out of sight, only to be handed *Barbie* fashion games. Game developers and their marketing teams developed early games for girls based on their perceptions of female gender from a male-centric perspective. This problem did not start with the inception of gaming culture itself; rather it was pre-existent, made visible through the practices of capitalism and the social construction of gender in the computer science fields and imprinted on the consumer culture that has been built around these technologies.

Gaming culture today is still dealing with the problems computing culture created nearly fifty years ago. We see attempts at inclusion of women into gaming culture, but inclusion by its very nature suggests some form of exclusion. By marketing directly to girls, companies are insinuating that there is a disparity within the market: that would be games for girls. If girls were thought to be disinterested in the popular games of the time, that would reinforce the idea that boys and girls both heavily prefer different styles of games. Another issue that contributed to this exclusion is the attachment of masculinity to the realm of technology, and in this case, gaming. Systematic issues of patriarchy and male dominated views of gender roles seeped their way into the early culture of gaming and its development: a result of gendered marketing practices.

It is important to understand not only why gaming culture developed the way it did but to understand the prerequisite ideas, views and stereotypes of game developers and other early technological engineers responsible for producing games, as well as holding them accountable as the shapers and influencers of this cultural outcome. One recent example of this was in 2018 when the Game Developers Conference announced it

would be awarding Atari co-founder Nolan Bushnell its coveted Pioneer Award.  After

not even 24 hours of community pushback and contention via Twitter using the hashtag

"#notnolan", the GCD decided to pull the award for the year.[3]  Their statement was:

> The Game Developers Choice Awards Advisory Committee, who vote on the Special Award winners for each show, have made the decision not to give out a Pioneer Award for this year's event, following additional feedback from the community. They believe their picks should reflect the values of today's game industry and will dedicate this year's award to honor the pioneering and unheard of voices of the past.[4]

They made it clear that the award should "reflect the values of today's game industry".[5]

Does this suggest that the past gaming industry held different values than we do today?

And if they did, what were they?  Bushnell was open about the promiscuous culture at

Atari in the early 1970s.  Stories ranged from board meetings in hot tubs and luring

young female secretaries in to join them, to pairing "the best-looking secretaries" to star

employees.[6]  The early culture around video game development was a reflection of

gender attitudes of the time and an influencer of gendered perceptions in video games.

This paper explains how the gaming industry, largely run by men, ignored the

power and agency of women in gaming and how it was stripped from them as the

popularity of gaming grew to the forefront of popular culture.  This included the women

who bought and played games and those women in game development who were often

overlooked on the basis of their gender.  This lack of agency on both sides of the coin is

---

[3] Cecilia D'Anastasio, "GDC Pulls Award After Outcry Over Atari Co-Founder Nolan Bushnell [Update]," Kotaku (Kotaku, January 31, 2018), https://kotaku.com/gdc-pulls-award-after-outcry-over-atari-founder-nolan-b-1822592638.

[4] D'Anastasio, "GDC Pulls Award After Outcry Over Atari Co-Founder Nolan Bushnell."

[5] D'Anastasio, "GDC Pulls Award After Outcry Over Atari Co-Founder Nolan Bushnell."

[6] Cecilia D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers: What Atari Was Really Like, According To Women Who Were There," Kotaku, February 12, 2018, https://kotaku.com/sex-pong-and-pioneers-what-atari-was-really-like-ac-1822930057.

related to the dominant maculine influence that has consumed gaming and technology to this day.  Past histories have notably documented the struggles of women in the field of software development and technology, but by bringing attention to the women ignored by men in gaming I will show how perceptions of gender were truly a driving force behind the male-dominated social construction of video game culture which led to the overshadowing of women who sought equal participation.

In an attempt to understand the gender dynamics and culture behind the development and commercialization of video game technology, I will be contributing to the vast work of both the histories of gender, technology and video games by assessing gaming culture as a battleground for women to reclaim the skill that was stripped from them due to gendered labor practices as well as the social barriers restricting women from being equal gamers and developers.This fight would not be made possible without the scholars who came before me in the history of technology.  Books like "*Gender at Work*" by Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle, "*Recoding Gender: Women's Changing Participation in Computing*" by Janet Abbate,, as well as "*Making Technology Masculine: Men, Women and Modern Machines in America 1870-1945*" by Ruth Oldenziel are staples in the immersive history of gender and technology.  These authors contributed invaluable insight through the vocalization of the voice of women throughout history whose contributions to the development and advancement of technology as a whole have been forgotten, erased or stolen.

Game and Pringle were early pioneers of feminist theory and labor.  They challenged the discussions on labor practices as a majority of scholars during the 1980s

would regularly ignore or overlook gender and how it influences the organization of labor. Game and Pringle saw gender relations not as functional but integral to the operations of capitalism: in other words, how the sexes interact with each other and shape gender roles within the labor market. When talking about capitalism and its role within the shaping of both video games and gender stereotypes within them, I am referring to the capitalist cycle from production, to retailing, and eventually consumption. This cycle plays a key role in perpetuating perceptions of gender that are formed through the basics of capitalism such as the makeup of work and labor. The authors posit that "there is nothing inherent in jobs that makes them either appropriately female or male. If anything remains fixed, it's the distinction between men's work and women's work."[7] These perceived differences in work are typically supported by either direct references to biology or some suggested biological stereotype regarding skill or ability. They claim the cause for this clash of identity is not just about difference, but the struggle for power: male domination over subordinate women.[8] If men's work changes, so will women's work, and vise versa. They argue that gendered work is a reflection of our socially constructed sexual identities, and these identities we create for ourselves shape the type of work we do. Game and Pringle use the field of computing technology as a lens through which they can explain this complicated social construction of gender and labor practice as at the time it was a new frontier, soon to be contested for power on the basis of who should control it. These ideas can then be seen in aspects of the gaming community and the power struggle that takes place as to who gaming is truly for.

[7] Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle, *Gender at Work* (North Sydney, Australia: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 15.
[8] Game and Pringle, *Gender at Work*, 16.

When I talk about labor and its effects on gaming culture and gender, I am specifically talking about the aspects of both "skill" and "work" as they pertain to pre-established gender roles in our society and their influence on the organization of work within a capitalist system.  Game and Pringle's definition of skill is gender biased. The process by which some jobs are defined as skilled and others as unskilled is complex, but by and large women's 'skills' are not recognized as such in the definitions of their jobs.  Skilled work is men's work."[9]  Skill has more often than not been defined by those considered to be masters of a craft or field, being predominantly men.  By this very standard, as a particular skill was deemed professional or not, men were quick to take up the field and further deny women of any claim to such skill or professionalism: for example, tailoring, how a man can easily make a profession out of this skill yet a woman was simply expected to have this skill to provide for her family.  This complex process of deskilling women goes on to play a crucial role in defining the clear gender boundaries in gaming development and culture.

The topic of gender serves as a framework through which I define the spectrum of masculinity and femininity, as well as how each is shaped by society and each other.  The perceived differences between the two will play a crucial role in defining how power is distributed and who wields it as well as how it's used to define social structures and space.  As Game and Pringle argue, "It is because of this power relation that women are assumed to be much closer to nature than men.  Whereas men are considered to have some agency in creating their social world, women are limited by biology---they bear

---

[9] Game and Pringle, *Gender at Work*, 18.

children."[10]  Traditionally, women's gender has been defined by physicalities such as anatomy and their role in reproduction, yet they hold weight in the social understanding of gender roles.  Whoever wields this power has the ability to mold and define the roles that each gender plays both in the labor force, at home, and in society.  Social constructions of gender would go on to shape video game development and culture to appear as  male-dominated, and thus severing early ties between women and computing.

In regards to the gendering of technology, Oldenziel discusses what seems to be a fetishization of computers by men, but more specifically the women in the computing field using them, that drives male aggression and prominence in the field itself.  She questions why it is that we are shocked to see a woman as a computer engineer, but would not look at a man twice.  This exotic relationship with women and technology is created through the construction of gender roles in society.  It seems as though technology is made out to be male territory, causing excitement and curiosity when a woman crosses into their perceived domain.  It is not Odenziel's goal to understand the exclusion of women from this field, rather it is to learn how notions of gender and technology construct each other.  She does this by strictly focusing on men as gendered male and using this lens as a way to try and understand why technology developed into a powerful symbol of male prowess.[11] Through this same lens, I will be questioning gaming software developers and marketing strategies and how this "male gaze" dictates and controls what girls play and their interests in computing.

---

[10] Game and Pringle, *Gender at Work*, 16.
[11] Ruth Odenziel, *Making Technology Masculine* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 11.

Lastly, in *Recoding Gender*, Abbate reminds us that contrary to popular belief, during the mid 20th century, women were at the forefront of computing. During World War II and up until the mid 1960s, women were encouraged to take up positions in skilled computing practices that often required deciphering military code, running logistics and other complicated calculations. Although proving more than capable of this intense work, by 1970 women accounted for just 13% of all computer science degrees and were quickly being ousted from these computing positions and put back on more secretarial positions.[12] Abbate suggests this massive shift was influenced by gender roles in the field of technology and computing, parallel to the shift in thought of associating software development with more intellectual intensity to be handled and created by men and for hardware use to be taught to women to use for secretarial work. This gender barrier towards women proved to constrain any opportunity or mobility in the fields of software engineering as it went against the stereotypes of the time such as the "stay at home mother". It was inconceivable for men to believe that women wanted to personally invest in a career instead of settling down and supporting a family. Abbate is crucial here as she amplifies the voices of the unheard women who were at the forefront of computing culture and tells their story and reveals to us how gendered labor practices have negatively impacted the influence of women on computing technology. I look to continue this story as I draw connections to this gendered understanding of technology to the skill and ability of female gamers, both on the programming side as well as the consumption end.

---

[12] Janet Abbate, *Recoding Gender* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 3, Figure 1.1. Percentage of female employed programmers and computer science degree earners in the United States.

This paper takes a chronological approach to the history of video games. It begins with an analysis of gender roles in the 1970s as gaming started to become popularized and profitable. Taking a look at the culture behind gaming pioneers like Atari will reveal signs of early gender stereotyping as well as reinforcement of restraints to women's mobility within the field of computer science and eventually the gaming industry and consumer culture. The second section will analyze the development and marketing practices of Her Interactive and other girls' game developers and their attempts at female liberation from a male-dominent gaming culture as well as the responses of female gamers to these efforts. The third and final section of this paper will take a look at the debate over violence in video games and the further gendering of gaming culture through the perception of media and marketing practices of the 1990s and the turn of the century. The conclusion of this paper will tie together all three sections by reflecting upon the decades of gendered stereotyping of video games and the lasting effects that it has had up until today. It will also question the current perception of gender and gaming to see if the initiatives made early on played a positive role in equalizing the playing field for women or simply contributed to the cycle.

## Section 1: Shaping of Gender in Early Gaming Culture

Prior to the start of gaming in the early 1970s, the United States was facing a variety of socio-cultural changes that would go on to influence the development spaces of gaming. The 1960s were seen as a progressive era in American history. The election of

John F. Kennedy and his political agenda called "The New Frontier" brought with it a progressive fervor that would ignite and support social participation, volunteerism, and various movements all across the country.[13] Lyndon B. Johnson would follow in these footsteps with his philosophy of the "Great Society" which would serve to address education, healthcare, urban issues, poverty and transportation.[14] This era of social change provided the space necessary for disenfranchised Americans, specifically African Americans, women, and the LGBTQ community to advocate for much needed change. In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights act as well as Title VII which prohibits any discrimination in employment based on an individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.[15] Despite this landmark legislature, these groups continued to face discrimination in all aspects of American life and business.

During this time, the very foundation of citizenry and American life seemed to be under attack by the U.S.S.R and Communism, creating anxieties surrounding the nuclear family. The idea of the nuclear family was centered around traditional gender stereotypes, typically led by the breadwinning father, married to the stay-at-home and child-rearing mother, together to raise their biological children. The social and cultural importance of maintaining the nuclear family was to perpetuate normalcy in the U.S. in a time of socio-cultural disturbances. These disruptions ranged from social movements like Civil Rights, second wave Feminism, and LGBTQ advocacy as well as the Communist threat and the Cold War. These progressive and radical ideas were

---

[13] "Kennedy's New Frontier," ushistory.org (Independence Hall Association), accessed September 28, 2020, https://www.ushistory.org/us/56b.asp.
[14] "Kennedy's New Frontier."
[15] Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub.L. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241 (1964).

challenging the status quo of American society and democracy. Early advertisements of video game consoles marketed to the nuclear family and tried to reinforce essential American ideals and social attitudes. This marketing strategy inadvertently alleviates the overwhelming fear of potentially exposing Americans to communism by reinforcing family values and keeping them in the home, together, away from immoral or un-American ideas circulating in the social climate of the 1960s-1970s around the world and on our own soil.

In this section, I will be working closely with the frameworks and histories of both Ruth Oldenziel and Steven L. Kent. Oldenziel has done an excellent job of identifying "men's love affair with technology" prior to the 1970s.[16] We see this in American advertising with the rise of the poster girl and booth babe to advertise masculinized technologies such as muscle cars and trucks. Women's exotic relationship with early computer technologies is constructed purely through socialized gender roles of the past. I follow a similar methodology as Oldenziel in my assessment of gender in the gaming industry as I look at these social constructions through the male perspective in order to see how female gender was seen and shaped as gaming started to grow and develop. This view allows us to "understand why technology developed into a powerful symbol of male, modern, and western prowess; how machines like cars, bridges, trains, and planes have become the measure of men, from which women have been excluded as a matter of course; why corsets have been banished to the basements of the modern classification systems of technology; why women ---when they do appear on the scene as

---

[16] Odenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 9.

engineers and inventors---function like *deae ex machina*."[17]  As men were at the forefront

of video game technology, this provided them the space to shape how gender was

understood in the environment  as well as how both male and female gender roles

participated in its early days.  Oldenziel further asserts that "these reports show how we

consider technology men's natural domain - a penchant that does not need explanation,

however."[18]  As men were swarming around technology, their presence within the field

became normalized and expected.  This compares to the rarity attributed to the

appearance of a woman within the computing field.  She was seen as "the odd one out,"

as if she was a lost child in an amusement park.  As I dive into the story of Atari and their

contributions to the shaping of gender and gaming these patterns will show bright as day.

Steven L. Kent's *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to*

*Pokemon--The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*

is one of, if not, the most comprehensive books on the history of video games.  The titles

length alone can reveal just how large this work is.  Although Kent does an excellent job

recording the timeline of video game development and cultural growth over time, he fails

to find space for gender and how it helped to shape the world of video games we know

and love today.  I will be drawing heavily on Kent's work to provide the historical

context behind what was going on in the video game industry at the time while weaving

in a framework of gender analysis surrounding technology to identify where gender fits

into this story and how it shaped the industry and culture as it developed and grew.

---

[17] Odenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 11.
[18] Odenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 10.

Given this social atmosphere of the 1970s, how do you market the first ever video game console before "video game" became a popularized term?[19] Magnavox, creators of the Odyssey, the first home video game console, struggled with that exact question. They would refer to their console with terms such as: "an electronic game simulator", "a closed circuit electronic playground", "a total play and learning experience", and even "the electronic game of the future."[20] Boasting a variety of twelve different games, the Odyssey was marketed to the whole family to enjoy. This new technology was marketed as a tool to strengthen family bonds as well as educate your children in a fun, new way. In the first brochure for the game you can see pictured in the lower right-hand corner an example of this nuclear family with the son and daughter sitting in their father's and mother's lap, respectively. Interestingly, the father and son are divided from the mother and daughter right down the middle, separated by the Odyssey itself. The console proclaims it is "the game of the future", but its advertising also perpetuates the gender stereotyping women would begin to face with the rise of this new technological culture despite its claims of family inclusion.

Although the Odyssey is known as the first home gaming console, it is simply a result of the first known coin-operated video game: *Computer Space* by Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney in collaboration with Nutting Associates released in 1971.[21] *Computer Space* was the simplified, commercial version of a game called *Spacewar!*, a game programmed into the DEC PDP-1 minicomputer at MIT in 1962 by Steven Russell.[22]

---

[19] Willaert, "Pixels in Print (Part 2): Advertising Odyssey – The First Home Video Game."
[20] Willaert, "Pixels in Print (Part 2): Advertising Odyssey – The First Home Video Game."
[21] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 32-33.
[22] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 18.

*Computer Space* was marketed differently due to one key factor: they were not marketing the cabinet to prospective players, rather, they were marketing to arcade operators who bought and stocked new "electro-mechanical games", as they were called.[23]  What is most problematic with Nutting and their products is their marketing strategy.

The *Computer Space* cabinet presented itself with a sleek, curvy fiberglass body with an eye-popping yellow coat, conveniently placed next to an attractive, curvy female model.  Upon closer inspection of the image, you can see the model's underwear through the gown she is wearing behind the glow of the cabinet.  The model's head lines up evenly with the screen while the control panel lines up with her pelvic region.  This physical placement of the woman in the field of view of the critical parts of the machine can be seen as an attempt to draw attention to the machine's parts, as well as hers.  By placing the model next to the machine, we are now comparing the bodies of both the machine and woman as if they are remotely comparable.  Are we supposed to find this machine to be sexy,  or are we supposed to find the woman to be just another object to be dominated by men?   It is also important to question the countless other options that could have been used as a model for this advertisement, but this conscious decision tells us a lot about the target market and the mindset of the producers of the ad.  The auto industry was already using booth babes to persuade male buyers into purchasing new cars; Nutting was trying to appeal to the same market and figured that they could do the same.[24]  These sexual innuendos go on to further reflect the idea that society's outlook on all forms of

[23] Kate Willaert, "Pixels In Print (Part 1): Advertising Computer Space – The First Arcade Video Game – Video Game History Foundation," Video Game History Foundation, April 10, 2018, https://gamehistory.org/first-arcade-game-advertisement-computer-space/.

[24] Willaert, "Pixels In Print (Part 1): Advertising Computer Space – The First Arcade Video Game."

technology shifted to be understood as a solely masculine endeavor: one in which women could only participate in by playing a supporting role.  Through hypersexualizing a woman next to a revolutionary piece of technology, it can be interpreted as reinforcement of male dominance in yet a new frontier: gaming.

Prior to the release of the advertisement for *Computer Space*, Nutting also released an advertisement for their electro-mechanical game called *Computer Quiz* in 1968 which boasted a similarly hypersexualized female model.  *Computer Quiz* was the first solid-state arcade game on the market.[25]  It also proved critical in breaking the stigma that electro-mechanical games were linked to crime, as pinball commonly was thought to be, through its perceived educational value.[26][27]  Despite this, Nutting chose to advertise the cabinet with another "sexy" model.  Both images in their ad show what seems to be a college graduate with Nutting's *Computer Quiz*.[28]  The advertisement once again attempts at implying that gaming is sexy.  Even if gaming wasnt sexy, they did know that sex sells.  After identifying a market of predominantly male arcade owners, using a poster girl to attract the attention of potential customers was an easy solution.  Although this marketing strategy may have worked, it also perpetuated gender stereotyping as well as provided the space for these ideas and behaviors to make their way into the early social construction of gaming and its culture.  These two

[25] Alexander Smith, "Computer Quiz," They Create Worlds, accessed September 22, 2020, https://videogamehistorian.wordpress.com/tag/computer-quiz/.

[26] Smith, "Computer Quiz."

[27] Laura June, "For Amusement Only: the Life and Death of the American Arcade," The Verge, January 16, 2013, https://www.theverge.com/2013/1/16/3740422/the-life-and-death-of-the-american-arcade-for-amusement-only.

[28] Willaert. "Pixels In Print (Part 1): Advertising Computer Space – The First Arcade Video Game."

advertisements for *Computer Quiz* set an early example for the gaming industry's marketing strategies and work culture, which would go on to influence major game developers such as Atari.

## A New Challenger Appears: Nolan Bushnell and Atari

The early 1970s marked the beginning of the arcade era which would go on to bring about the "golden age" of arcade video games towards the end of the decade leading into the early 1980s.  Before a golden age starts, there must be a period of growth and development, with pioneers who helped to shape the outcome of something so monumental, and for gaming that would be Nolan Bushnell.

Bushnell was born to a Mormon family in Clearfield, Utah, which he left behind early in life but always spoke warmly about later on.[29]  He graduated with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from the University of Utah's College of Engineering and was a member of the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity.[30]  Bushnell was always involved in early gaming technologies whether it was playing the original *Spacewar* by Steve Russsel in college computer rooms or working as a manager of the games department at Lagoon Amusement Park.[31]  Bolstering his experience with gaming technology and his desire to push its boundaries, Bushnell soon started developing a coin-operated version of *Spacewar* which would come to be known as *Computer Space*.[32]  His dream became a reality when he was taken on by none other than Nutting Associates who partnered with

---

[29] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 28.
[30] Keith Smith, "Annotated Atari Depositions, Part 1," Annotated Atari Depositions, Part 1, January 1, 2015, http://allincolorforaquarter.blogspot.com/2015/01/atari-depositions-part-1.html.
[31] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 29-30.
[32] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 31.

Bushnell and licensed his game for manufacture.[33]  With the track record of manufacturing and marketing the successful *Computer Quiz*, *Computer Space* was expected to have the same success: not to mention the same advertising and marketing strategies.

Recalling the marketing methods and advertising images of both *Computer Quiz* and *Computer Space*, we see each game cabinet paired up with an attention-grabbing female model in hopes to attract the curiosity of potential buyers.  Kent describes Bushnell in this regard as "always aware of the importance of presentation, [Bushnell] put a special emphasis on creating an elaborate futuristic cabinet to hold his game.  In his mind, the cabinet would be the huckster convincing people that they wanted to play---the same job he'd performed on the midway at the amusement park."[34]  Despite his efforts, the game did not sell as well as he had hoped.  If potential buyers were lured in by either the sleek design of the cabinet or the model on the advertising page, they were often scared away by the long instruction manual or the complex gameplay.  Bushnell also blamed Nutting for its poor marketing. Kent quotes Bushnell as stating, "Nutting was literally about to go bankrupt.  I mean, they really had some problems.  And [*Computer Space*] did okay, but it really didn't do nearly as well as it could have...In some ways it was a blessing to have worked for Nutting.  It didn't take very long to figure out I couldn't possibly screw things up more than these guys had.  Seeing their mistakes gave me a lot of confidence in my ability to do better on my own."[35]  While it seems that Nutting's marketing team was responsible for the attempts at "sexifying" video games, Bushnell

---

[33] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 32.
[34] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 32.
[35] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 34.

would go on to likewise reinforce these stereotypes of women and gaming in his future workplace. After moving on from Nutting to create Syzygy with Ted Dabney and Larry Bryan, they later found out the company name was already taken in California. Shortly after, Bryan dropped out of the arrangement and Atari was born.[36]

It's hard to deny the passion Bushnell displayed for the future of gaming, but he also heavily contributed to the reinforcement of gender stereotyping in both the work environment and gaming culture overall. Atari is arguably the most controversial video game company in history due to its undeniable influence on the rise of video games and the culture surrounding them, but also for its questionable work culture and practices that contributed both directly and indirectly to the shaping of the culture they helped create. Known as the fastest-growing company in U.S. history, Atari started out just like every other Silicon Valley venture: in a small 1,000-square-foot industrial space.[37] Despite their humble beginning, Atari wasn't like every other start-up. Bushnell had a very unique outlook on how he wanted to run Atari which would go on to influence and popularize today's Silicon Valley culture.[38] In the Netflix docuseries *High Score*, Bushnell states in an interview, "We were all in our late 20s and we thought to ourselves, what we want is to create a new kind of company, an Age of Aquarius company, where our work ethic was work hard, play hard."[39] Staying true to this philosophy, Atari

---

[36] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 35.

[37] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 38.

[38] Charles Russo, "Game Changer: Atari and the Dawn of Video Game Culture," Medium (THE SIX FIFTY, November 20, 2017), https://thesixfifty.com/game-changer-lasting-legacy-of-the-atari-2600-4bea9717bf3.

[39] William Acks and Frances Costrel, dir. *High Score*. Netflix, 2020. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81019087?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2Cc9cc4ba4825fa3c0 0e62b07305b2dc7e7a762802%3A6d6bceb6e894f4285ccfd90a33affec0bfdbf70e%2Cc9cc4ba48 25fa3c00e62b07305b2dc7e7a762802%3A6d6bceb6e894f4285ccfd90a33affec0bfdbf70e%2Cunk nown%2C

certainly worked hard and played just as hard.  The first full-time employee of Atari

Corporation was Cynthia Villanueva, Bushnell's seventeen-year-old babysitter.[40]  Hired

as a receptionist, she was told to "put on the show" to give callers the impression that

Atari was already an established company and not just another startup.[41]  She would go

on to do a lot of the heavy lifting around the company to account for the limited budget

and small employee pool.[42]  After her first year with the company, she received

congratulations in the company newsletter describing her as the "sexy, red-faced

secretary".[43]  As Atari grew larger, the culture of the office grew more questionable.

Atari quadrupled their workspace to 4,000 square feet and began to hire more workers.[44]

Kent quotes Bushnell as saying, "That's when we started bringing in these guys we got at

the unemployment office.  There were members of motorcycle gangs and people who

found they could fence the televisions and buy heroin.  We didn't think that any of that

existed here.  I mean, this was San Jose, California, really a very pristine community."[45]

Low wages, long hours, and the "fun atmosphere" led to the offices becoming notorious

as a "Mecca of drug abuse".[46]  The wild culture of Atari is no secret in today's histories.

From promiscuous board meetings, personal secretaries, code-naming *Pong* after a

female employee who "was stacked and had the tiniest waist", and even replicating

joysticks to look and feel like breasts were things that defined the culture at Atari.[47]

---

[40] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 39.
[41] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 39.
[42] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 39.
[43] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."
[44] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 51.
[45] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 51.
[46] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 51-52.
[47] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."

Traditional patriarchal gender stereotypes were constantly being reinforced on a daily

basis in the Atari offices.  Women were treated like the technologies they were hired to

work on.  Women's role at Atari was supplementary to what the men and lead engineers

were doing.  Afterall, Bushnell did treat his programmers like mini-gods.[48]

This lax working environment was new in the Silicon Valley area.  Leaving the

button down shirt and tie at home and slugging into work mid-day with a six-pack and

your dog was acceptable as long as you got your job done.[49]  To encourage workers,

Bushnell would tap a keg on Fridays if the weekly quota was met.[50]  Atari's version of

fun was similar to that of a fraternity: as were their perceptions and treatment of women

as objects.  Atari was known to hire a lot of women who exclusively worked in the

research division and the cabinet-stuffing line.[51]  It was very rare that you would find a

woman in one of the technical divisions of the company; for example, Dona Bailey,

co-creator of the 1981 smash hit *Centipede*, was one of Atari's only female programers.[52]

According to Oldenziel, this gendered division of technology is not just an isolated

incident, but rather a result of early attitudes and social constructions of technology.  She

argues that when women like Dona Bailey and other notable women in the gaming

industry pop up they are treated as *deae ex machina*: some unexpected plot filler in the

story of gaming with no explanation as to how it got there.[53]  She further explains that the

---

[48] Tom Sito, *Moving Innovation: A History of Computer Animation* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press), 2015.
[49] David Kushner, "Sex Drugs & Video Games," David Kushner, July 19, 2012, http://www.davidkushner.com/article/sex-drugs-video-games/.
[50] Kushner, "Sex Drugs & Video Games."
[51] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."
[52] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."
[53] Odenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 11.

rarity of seeing women as programers and engineers "shows us how we continually view their entry into the technical domain as an exotic but more likely an exceptional, strange, and alien event."[54]  At Atari, this seems to be the case as it reinforced gender roles in such a way that talented technical women were a rarity or oddity.  Women at Atari were not valued based on their skill and work, but their looks.

In the article *Sex, Pong, And Pioneers* by Cecilia D'Anastasio, she highlights the culture of Atari by sharing the perspective of 12 women who worked there.  Dona Bailey, one of Atari's brightest programmers said. "It was kind of rough sometimes.  It was a culture that I don't think they were thinking, 'There is one woman, we should modify our behavior for her sake'...I grew thicker skin."[55]  This example reveals that women are not the "exclusive bearers" of gender as Oldenziel suggests.[56]  In this case, men gendered male are defining the social norms of the workplace while women gendered female are required to play along.  Men in our patriarchal society are also wielders and shapers of gender and their roles.  This power allows men to shape their stories, professional strategies, and identities.[57]

Evelyn Soto, a graphic designer responsible for the original logos for the Atari 2600 and the 5200 also shared Bailey's experience.[58]  She initially stated in her interview that she had "a couple negative experiences, but it was mostly innuendo," before she added, "I don't want to talk about it."[59]  Soto's experience doesn't seem to be a single

---

[54] Odenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 10.
[55] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."
[56] Odenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 11.
[57] Odenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 11.
[58] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."
[59] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."

isolated issue.  Wanda Hill, an electro-mechanical drafter said, "There was a certain amount of sexism as far as ogling, but that went both ways."[60]  Stories of ogling and innuendos are a common thread throughout these personal narratives.  Despite this, some women did claim that these behaviors were simply due to it being a "different time": an excuse to later be used by Bushnell himself.[61]  Given this context, we must not only recognize the women who decided to stay with Atari, but ponder just how many left because this behavior was unacceptable.[62]

The fine line between sexy and sexism was very thin at Atari, although some people attributed it to the 1970's hippie era of peace and love as well as the increasing embracement of second wave feminism.[63]  It is undeniable that the 1970s were a time of dramatic social changes, but none of those changes made their way into the gaming industry at this point.  In 2012, David Kushner and *Playboy Magazine* would publish an article describing the workplace as one of "sex, drugs, and video games."[64]  Bushnell and Dabney both chipped in to help their old third partner Larry Bryan in filming a porno movie.[65]  The article describes both partners feeling bad about Bryan missing out on Atari's success, so they decided to help fund the film.[66]  Titled "A Cadillac Named Desire", the film was recorded in 1978 and allegedly took place at Atari Headquarters

---

[60] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."
[61] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."
[62] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."
[63] D'Anastasio, "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers."
[64] Kushner, "Sex Drugs & Video Games."
[65] Cat DeSpira, "The Time Atari Funded a Porno and Other Things You Probably Didn't Know," Retro Bitch, February 8, 2018, https://retrobitch.wordpress.com/2018/02/02/the-time-atari-funded-a-porno-and-other-things-you-probably-didnt-know/.
[66] DeSpira, "The Time Atari Funded a Porno and Other Things You Probably Didn't Know."

with some employees even being said to have taken part in the scenes.[67]  According to

Geraldine Finn, pornography helps to construct man as the observer of women, and

women as the observed of men.[68]  The stories of women at Atari seem to line up with this

observer/observed complex.  As this structure of observation was occurring, ideas of

gender were constantly being challenged and reinforced.  Women were working with

complicated technologies and proving to be skillful programmers and engineers, yet their

objectification was limiting their perceived value in the eyes of Bushnell and other

leading men in the company.  Bushnell goes on to blame this past behavior on the social

culture of the 1960s and 1970s when he says, "But then, very quickly, most of us said,

'Hey, this isn't really effective.  This isn't good.' But by that time some of us had already

destroyed our lives."[69]  Not only have they destroyed some of their lives, but they would

be the cause for future damage to women in the gaming industry and the shaping of

gender norms in that environment to this very day.

As shocking as it is to uncover the history of Atari and what took place behind the

closed doors of the gaming giant in the 1970s, what is more shocking is to reveal the

social implications of its culture and behavior on the gaming industry and consumer

culture down the road.  Why is it that in 2017 women account for nearly 47% of video

game players in Australia, yet only 15% of game developers identified as female?[70]  In

---

[67] DeSpira, "The Time Atari Funded a Porno and Other Things You Probably Didn't Know."
[68] Geraldine Finn, "Patriarchy and Pleasure: The Pornographic Eye/I." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* Vol 9, no 1-2 (08-01-1985): 81-95.
[69] Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 56.
[70] Brooke Maggs, "More Women Are Working in Games - but Gender Bias Is Still an Issue," ABC News (ABC News, July 25, 2017), https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-25/games-industry-more-women-working-but-gender-bias-remains-issue/8741744.

2015, despite women holding nearly 57% of all professional occupations, they only make up 25% of all computing jobs, and this number is drastically lower for women of color: nearing the one to three percent ranges for both Latinas and Black women, respectively.[71] It becomes a problem when women are glorified for their looks and not their contributions.  As this behavior is analyzed retrospectively, it can be argued that game developers adopted the predominant societal views on gender and perpetuated them into the video game industry and eventually its culture.  At the time, employees of Atari and Bushnell himself may not have directly known what their actions and behaviors were shaping, but we are dealing with those repercussions today.

# Section 2: Developer Responses to Gender Stereotyping in Video Games

As video games were breaking into the popular culture, the question of whether girls were playing games was still up for debate.  By the 1990s, a majority of video games released were geared toward boys and men as they were thought to be the most profitable market.  Men were the makers, buyers, and players.[72]  It was also believed that girls and women did not enjoy video games as much as their male gendered counterparts did.  This stereotype can be attributed to many things: from the lack of female

---

[71] Catherine Ashcraft, Brad McLain, and Elizabeth Eger, "Women in Tech: The Facts," National Center for Women and Information Technology, 2016, https://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/resources/womenintech_facts_fullreport_05132016.pdf, 6.

[72] Tracey Lien, "No Girls Allowed," Polygon, December 2, 2013, https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/12/2/5143856/no-girls-allowed.

representation in early video game characters to the neglect of women on the development end being gatekept from video game programming and creation. Some even blame what was dubbed the video game crash of 1983 when revenues fell nearly 97% due to so many "low-quality games" being released into the market.[73] As a result of the crash, game developers invested in market research and found that most of their consumers were young boys, prompting game development to cater to a male-centric audience.[74] This aggressive marketing is yet another contributing factor to why girls' desires in games were overlooked and ignored.[75]

Gender stereotypes were reinforced with every new video game that got released. Some of the most popular games of the 1990s that attributed to this thinking were: *Doom* (1993), *Quake* (1996), *GoldenEye 007* (1997), *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992), and *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996) just to name a few. These games are known for their fast-paced first-person shooting, blood, and gore. From fighting your way out of a Nazi prison camp to slaughtering wave after wave of demons from Hell, these games were fronted by bad-ass, shredded male characters who were "here to kick ass and chew bubblegum...and ran out of gum."[76] In a 2017 study, only 7% of FPS (first-person shooter) players were female.[77] While the boys were running out of gum, they certainly were not running out of games to play.

---

[73] Stephanie Buck, "In the Boys-Only Market of Early Video Games, Amy Briggs Built the First One for Girls," Medium (Timeline, March 28, 2017), https://timeline.com/plundered-hearts-amy-briggs-7c8699847bed.

[74] Buck, "In the Boys-Only Market of Early Video Games, Amy Briggs Built the First One for Girls."

[75] Buck, "In the Boys-Only Market of Early Video Games, Amy Briggs Built the First One for Girls."

[76] Apogee Software, *Duke Nukem*, (July 1, 1991, Aalborg, Denmark, Apogee Software). Video game.

[77] Nick Yee, "Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down The Percentage of Female Gamers By Genre," Quantic Foundry, January 19, 2017, https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/.

Up to this point, personal computers (PCs), were even marketed towards boys.

This is a key factor to the disparity between boys and girls and extent of their

participation with video game culture.  In a video ad for the Apple II PC in 1985, it

narrates the story of a young boy named Brian who heads to school with the dream of

becoming an astronaut.[78]  The ad goes on to stress the importance of Brian learning how

to master the Apple II and how it would be crucial in his success.  About fifty seconds

into the ad, Brian reaches past the young girl next to him while she turns her head and

presses a key on her keyboard with a smirk on his face and a look of disappointment in

hers.  Brian's actions seem to be mocking his female classmate as if he is showcasing a

natural level of knowledge that he possesses that she can only achieve through hard work

and luck.  This small scene shows how boys were expected to be masters of technology

while women can only hope but to keep up and not get left in the dust.  Gender played a

crucial role in defining who was capable enough to use this technology.  As a result of

targeted marketing strategies like the Apple II, a 1985 study revealed that 55% of women

reported not using the computer at all throughout the week compared to 27% of men.[79]

The lack of women using technology directly reflected the lowering numbers of female

graduates with degrees in technology and engineering.  It can be argued that the gendered

advertisements of the Apple II and similar technologies empowered men to seek

---

[78] T.L. Andrews, "Silicon Valley's Gender Gap Is the Result of Computer-Game Marketing 20 Years Ago," Quartz (Quartz, February 16, 2017), https://qz.com/911737/silicon-valleys-gender-gap-is-the-result-of-computer-game-marketing-20-years-ago/.

[79] Archive-It, "Patterns of IT Use," The Application and Implications of IT in the Home - Patterns of IT Use, June 29, 2015, https://wayback.archive-it.org/5902/20150629134551/http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf01313/patterns.htm.

professions in programming while adversely discouraging women from entering into what was perceived to be a male-dominated field. This perception of gender roles and level of interest with technology is just that, a perception. Marketing propaganda such as the Apple II video ad contributed to decades of stereotype reinforcement that women just were not capable or interested in the potentials of computer technologies. The social construction of gender pertaining to video game technology was heavily molded by the forces of marketing campaigns in their attempts to create a consumer base of boys. Ultimately, the marketing and perceptions against women and their relationship with technology only proved to further disassociate women and girls from being video game consumers as well.

We see historically that marketing for games has been biased towards both boys and men, leaving out women and girls as prospective customers and players. Advertisements from the 1970s displayed attractive poster models and booth babes to catch male attention similar to car advertisements; the 1980s solidified the male protagonist as the meta narrative in characters such as Mario, Donkey Kong, Mr. PacMan, Link and Mega Man. Female characters like Princess Peach, Princess Zelda, and Pauline played the iconic damsel-in-distress and needed constant saving from their male counterparts. Other characters like Samus Aran of *Metroid* and Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider* were two heavily sexualized female protagonists, later revealed to be a part of the marketing strategy by the lead writer of the game *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015), Rhianna Pratchett.[80] Women and girls did not have a variety of representation in terms of

---

[80] Dan Crawley, "The Sexualization of Lara Croft Is a Thing of the Past, Says Rise of the Tomb Raider Writer," VentureBeat (VentureBeat, November 9, 2015),

these characters' appearances either.  From the unrealistic body proportions and sizes of

physical features to skin complexions and ethnicities.  Female characters were typically

created by male game designers through a "male gaze".[81]  Teresa Lynch, a media

communications researcher at Indiana University explains that video game companies are

"marginalizing half its audience [by] making women characters pander to the male gaze."
[82]  In her study, she analyzed a list of 571 playable female characters from 1989 to 2014

and assessed them for signs of hypersexualization; these signs included nudity,

over-enlarged breasts and unrealistically narrow waists.[83]  Her results identified a peak in

sexualization in 1995 and then it declined, yet female characters were still subjected to

being more objectified than male characters as well as appearing more often in secondary

roles in plots.  She further identified that female game developers only accounted for 3%

of those jobs in 1989; compared to the overall percentage of 30% of the industry being

women, of which a majority had low-paying, low-ranking positions.  These shocking

numbers and statistics reveal that the problem was not only in computer science

specifically, but it was finding its way into video game development.  In response to this

problem, companies such as Her Interactive and Purple Moon have attempted to address

the gender disparities and lack of representation in video games for girls as well as

empower girls to pursue careers in the field of computer science and game development.

https://venturebeat.com/2015/11/09/the-sexualization-of-lara-croft-is-a-thing-of-the-past-says-rise-of-the-tomb-raider-writer/.

[81] Odenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 11.

[82] Lora Strum, "Study Tracks 31-Year History of Female Sexualization in Video Games," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, July 8, 2016),
https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/study-tracks-31-year-history-of-female-sexualization-in-video-games.

[83] Strum, "Study Tracks 31-Year History of Female Sexualization in Video Games."

This section will assess the validity of the stereotypes about girls and their interests in video games. I will be discussing why there was a need for games gendered toward both girls and women as well as contrasting the argument against game companies trying to market games to cliches of femininity such as fashion, make-up, romance, drama and the color pink. Lastly this section will assess how developers and companies rose up to advocate for girl gamers, what girls wanted in games, and ultimately the success or failure of this initiative and its effects on the future of gaming culture.

## Grandparents of the Industry: The Legacy of Sierra On-Line

Before we talk about the direct solutions to the problems facing female gamers, it is important to recognize the significance of video game developer and publisher Sierra Entertainment, formerly Sierra On-Line. In 1979, Roberta Williams discovered the text-only adventure game, *Colossal Cave*, also known as *Adventure*.[84] *Colossal Cave* is the grandparent of the genre we would later identify as the role-playing game, or RPG. Inspired by the popular tabletop RPG, *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Colossal Cave* allowed players to explore a cave filled with lost treasures by inputting one to two word commands to navigate through the environment and interact with objects and enemies. Players would read the story text on the screen and type in their response of what they wished to do next: for example: "take item" or "use key". *Colossal Cave* gave players the thrill of an open-ended world to explore and learn about. This is the basis that Williams would build off of as she conceptualized her own RPG adventure game,

---

[84] "Sierra History," Sierra History - The Sierra Help Pages, accessed September 9, 2020, http://www.sierrahelp.com/Misc/History.html.

*Mystery House*.[85]  After a very convincing restaurant dinner discussion with her husband,

Ken Williams, and many strange looks from other patrons glaring at their table as

Roberta talked in depth about the details of the death of each character in her story, the

couple decided to make it a reality.[86]  The Williamses were going to change gaming

forever with one small innovation: adding graphics to the story to supplement the text.

This was a massive undertaking on behalf of Ken, a programmer, as computer technology

was primitive and its ceiling for potential seemed low.  This changed with the release of

the Apple II as it was able to push the limitations of the current technological ceiling.[87]

Adding graphics proved difficult due to the large amount of memory it used to run,

therefore the graphics for *Mystery House* were described by Ken as "black-and-white

outlines resembling the drawing a six-year-old might make on a chalk board given only a

few minutes while the teacher was out of the room."[88]  However, this small but crucial

innovation to RPG gaming paved the ground for some of video games' most popular and

beloved titles such as *The Elder Scrolls*, *Final Fantasy*, *Fallout*, *Dark Souls*, *The Legend

of Zelda* and the list goes on.  After this groundbreaking advancement, in 1996 Sierra was

acquired by CUC International and eventually a long chain of mergers thereafter which

basically brought an end to Sierra On-Line.[89]

   The reason why I place significant importance in the founding of Sierra

Entertainment and their contributions to gaming is due to The Williamses' desire to

---

[85] Ken Williams, "Introduction to The Roberta Williams Anthology," The Sierra Help Pages, accessed September 9, 2020, http://www.sierrahelp.com/Misc/IntroductionToRWAnth.html.
[86] Williams, "Introduction to The Roberta Williams Anthology."
[87] Williams, "Introduction to The Roberta Williams Anthology."
[88] Williams, "Introduction to The Roberta Williams Anthology."
[89] "Sierra On-Line, Inc.," Company History, accessed September 9, 2020, https://www.company-histories.com/Sierra-OnLine-Inc-Company-History.html.

expand the possibilities of technology and move the culture of gaming forward as well as to highlight the inclusiveness of the RPG genre as a whole.  Role playing games allow the player to delve into an alternate reality and experiment with near endless possibilities that hold no consequences in reality.  RPGs allow people who are restricted in reality's social spaces to enter new environments where the "societal norms" are shaped by the player.  The world of RPGs empower the player to make choices for themselves and to explore not only the physical environments of the game but to explore within themselves as well.  The concept of character creation is favorable among women and the LGBTQ community as both suffer from constant social pressures.  Developer Rebecca Heineman explains that, "Role playing games are very attractive because it allows you to play a character of your own creation.  The biggest appeal of this game is that it doesn't create a character for you.  You create the characters.  You play as somebody you would aspire to be, good or bad, but you can't become in real life."[90]   Within the realm of the RPG, players are able to explore and reinvent themselves without being judged or criticized for it.  RPGs give players the ability to control their own representation in game as opposed to being given a character to forcefully play and dredge through an entire story as: that character typically being a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual male in most cases.

## Enter: GayBlade

It wasn't just girls and women who were being underrepresented in video game development; the LGBTQ community struggled for representation in both reality and fantasy worlds alike.  One example of video games as a medium of resistance to the

---

[90] Acks and Costrel, *High Score*.

social norms of gender and sexuality was *GayBlade* by Ryan Best in 1992.  Best

developed *GayBlade* in response to the AIDS epidemic and the political condemnation of

the LGBTQ community in the 1980s and 1990s.[91]  The game manual states:

> "GayBlade takes players into an ancient and dark dungeon on a terrifying
> Quest—to rescue Empress Nelda from the disgusting right-wing creatures
> inhabiting the dungeon. Fortunately, the rescue party is made up of heroic Drag
> Queens, Queers, Lesbians, and others who will stop at nothing to get their beloved
> Empress back to luxurious Castle GayKeep. But can they succeed when so many
> others have failed before them?"[92]

As with any RPG, you create your character and team and head out on your adventure.

Along the way some enemies you may face were: TV evangelists, young republicans,

rednecks, homophobic cops, and so on.[93]  Your armor and weapons of choice may have

included: leather jackets, aprons, purses, condoms, press-on nails, or even "blo"-dryers.[94]

The ultimate goal of the game was beating the final boss, Lord Nanahcub (Buchanan

backwards).[95]  Patrick Buchanan was a conservative politician who contributed to three

presidential administrations through the 1970s and 1980s and known for his open

opposition to the feminist and LGBTQ movements.[96]  In the Netflix docuseries *High

Score*, Best says, "*Gayblade* was the first role playing game that's focused on the LGBTQ

community.  The mainstream computer games, if they have any gay and lesbian

characters, they are always playing a minor part. It kind of represents how we've all been

---

[91] Acks and Costrel, *High Score*.

[92] "GayBlade," LGBTQ Video Game Archive, June 26, 2020,
https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/games/games-by-decade/1990s/gayblade/.

[93] LGBTQ Video Game Archive, "*Gayblade*."

[94] LGBTQ Video Game Archive, "*Gayblade*."

[95] LGBTQ Video Game Archive, "*Gayblade*."

[96] Adam Nagourney, "'Cultural War' of 1992 Moves In From the Fringe," The New York Times
(The New York Times, August 29, 2012),
https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/30/us/politics/from-the-fringe-in-1992-patrick-j-buchanans-words-now-seem-mainstream.html.

marginalized. Almost like were an afterthought."[97] Games like *GayBlade* were a much

needed response to social perceptions towards gender norms and sexuality in American

society and how those perceptions heavily influenced game development. Representation

in video games proves to not just be an issue with women but for those part of the

LGBTQ community as well. Best set a strong example for future developers and

companies whose goals were to create games for marginalized peoples and

underrepresented players. He asserted that LGBTQ and female characters should not just

be secondary or supplementary characters, rather they should be normalized as

protagonists and main characters, too.

Best's game challenged the heteronormalcy of early video game development and

consumer culture by introducing queerness as integral as opposed to "other". What Best

and *GayBlade* did for the LGBTQ community needed to be replicated for female gamers

of all ages. Best recognized that the queer community was constantly being

disenfranchised on the basis of gender and sexuality and created the space for the

LGBTQ community to feel represented in gaming.

## Broderbund: Myst and the First Female...Villain?

Despite the lack of representation for girls in gaming, companies like Broderbund

were producing a variety of games that appealed to all genders and identities as their

content was not directed at one specific audience. Founded in 1980 by two brothers,

Douglas and Gary Carlston, Broderbund ("broder", Danish/Swedish for "brothers" and

---

[97] Acks and Costrel, *High Score*.

"bund", German for "alliance") would go on to create games for all users to enjoy.[98]

Incorporated in California as Broderbund Software Inc. in 1981, Douglas would become

the company's first president while Gary would be named the first chief executive officer.

[99]  Soon after, the two brothers hired their sister Cathy Carlston who quickly became the

vice-president of educational market planning.[100]  In 1984, the company diversified by

adding productivity and educational programs to their product catalogues just as personal

computing started to become widely accepted.[101]  Their first hit was *The Print Shop* in

1984, a "home creativity" program that allowed inexperienced computer users to create

calendars, greeting cards, fliers, posters, and signs.[102]  Creating software that was easy to

use for new computer users was a niche and successful market for the company, which

led them to turn their attention towards educational programs for schools.

This focus led to the development of *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* in

1985, based on a geography game the brothers created as children.  The game was

credited as the first "edutainment" software on the market for both its entertainment and

educational values.[103]  Parents and teachers both loved the game as it required players to

use historical and geographical information to catch Carmen Sandiego, an international

monument thief.[104]  Not only did the game show exceptional value for education, it also

provided young girls with a new role model in Carmen Sandiego.  She is often described

[98] "Broderbund Software," FundingUniverse, accessed September 14, 2020,
http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/broderbund-software-history/.
[99] FundingUniverse, "Broderbund Software."
[100] FundingUniverse, "Broderbund Software."
[101] FundingUniverse, "Broderbund Software."
[102] FundingUniverse, "Broderbund Software."
[103] FundingUniverse, "Broderbund Software."
[104] FundingUniverse, "Broderbund Software."

as "the first major American pop culture example of a mischievous yet beloved hero who also happens to be both a woman and a Latin American."[105] Sandiego was different in that the game was not just named after her, but she was also the final challenge in the game. Compare this to famous franchise video game bosses like Bowser from any *Mario Brothers* game, Ridley from *Metroid*, and even Ganon (Ganondorf) from *The Legend of Zelda*. Frances Martel explains, "For many children, Sandiego was the pinnacle of cool for her encyclopedic knowledge of history, her keen but conservative fashion sense, and her ability to run and mainstream the well-oiled machine that is V.I.L.E. For little Latinas, she was the most educated, successful, and powerful figure the culture had given them that finally looked a little like them."[106] The *Carmen Sandiego* series was a start in the right direction by dissociating girls from the traditional gender norms and instead helped to promote a positive representation of women and characters of color.

However, Broderbund was not done innovating the culture of gaming yet. In 1991, they "flirted with the idea of merging with Sierra On-Line Inc. in a deal that would have made Broderbund a wholly owned subsidiary of Sierra, an entertainment software publisher."[107] In March of the same year, the merger was called off. Despite the failed merger, Broderbund was still revolutionizing the gaming market with its 1992 release of *Just Grandma and Me*; an interactive storybook designed to be read on computers. After the company's massive success with children aged 11-14, they decided to take a swing at

---

[105] Frances Martel, "Who In The World Is Carmen Sandiego? CEO, Intellectual, & America's Most Positive Latina Role Model," The Mary Sue, February 28, 2012, https://www.themarysue.com/carmen-sandiego-latina-role-model/.
[106] Martel, "Who In The World Is Carmen Sandiego?"
[107] FundingUniverse, "Broderbund Software."

the teenage market with the release of *Myst* in 1993.[108]  *Myst* is described as "a

non-violent adventure-exploration game that encouraged players to employ

puzzle-solving skills in a surrealistic world."[109]  The game would maintain its spot as the

number one best selling video game for nearly a decade.[110]  The game itself had no

combat, platforming or any competitive elements as well as greatly differing from

traditional adventure games of the time.[111]  So how did *Myst* become one of the top 20

best-selling video games of all time?  According to Rand Miller, founder of Cyan Inc.

and developer of *Myst*:

> "We were trying to make something that would appeal to people who
> didn't necessarily always play games. We wanted the interface to be really
> intuitive and easy. You would just sit in front of it and there was a mouse and one
> button and there weren't a lot of menus on the screen and there weren't a lot of
> keyboard commands. We wanted everything to kind of fade away so you could be
> lost in this world. So we thought that might appeal to a broader group, but our
> 'broader group' meant that we were thinking 'oh, maybe we'll sell 100,000.' The
> reality was that it was a lot more than that."[112]

*Myst*'s revolutionary appeal was that it really didn't appeal to one specific identity of

gamers, rather it was widely accepted by all different types of gamers; male or female,

young or older.  Inline with this idea, Miller says, "if it resonated with a larger audience,

or an audience that wasn't used to video games, it was probably because we weren't

necessarily just trying to fit into a mold, maybe. It made me think at the time, because it

started selling so well, 'wait a minute, maybe video games are only really appealing to a

---

[108] FundingUniverse, "Broderbund Software."
[109] FundingUniverse, "Broderbund Software."
[110] Jeffrey Matulef, "Myst Connection: The Rise, Fall and Resurrection of Cyan," Eurogamer.net (Eurogamer.net, September 12, 2016), https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2016-08-31-myst-connection-the-rise-fall-and-resurrection-of-cyan.
[111] Matuleft, "Myst Connection."
[112] Matuleft, "Myst Connection."

niche group and there is a larger group of people that will play video games."[113]  Miller

was onto something.  The niche group of gamers he was likely referring to were young

boys and teens.  But as *Myst* had shown, there was a larger market for gender-neutral

games than both developers and marketers perceived there to be.  Although Broderbund's

success with games like *Myst* proved that video games were not reliant on gender

stereotypes to be a hit, games were failing at providing girls with empowering role

models and characters.  This lack of positive female representation in video games would

end up being the call to action for game developer Her Interactive, better known as "the

pioneers of games targeted towards female play preferences."[114]

## Her Interactive: Investigating the Gender Gap with Nancy Drew

Women were behind the scenes helping to develop games, code them, market them and

even write about them, yet an unbiased representation of female characters failed to be

actualized and the culture of gaming communities reflected this.  This was a reflection of

a massive shift in marketing strategies and the developing culture around games: "boys

only".  In 2014, NPR published an article detailing the trend in computer science degrees

earned by women from 1970 to 2010.[115]  It shows that in 1984 the percent of computer

science degrees earned by women dropped from nearly 37% to a shocking 17% by 2010.

[116]  By the 1990s, women were not just lacking representation in video games, but their

representation behind the games was diminishing quickly as well.  Marketing strategies

---

[113] Matuleft, "Myst Connection."

[114] Jay S. Jacobs, "The Case of the Pioneering Game Company," PopEntertainment, Dec. 3, 2006, 1, Box 4, Folder 7, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[115] Steve Henn, "When Women Stopped Coding," NPR (NPR, October 21, 2014), https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/10/21/357629765/when-women-stopped-coding.

[116] Henn, "When Women Stopped Coding."

have been shifting toward both boys and men for two decades by the 1990s, reflecting

that gaming and its development were continuing to grow as male territory.  As the

gender gap was growing wider on the development end, the gap was also mirrored on the

consumer end.

To challenge this, there needed to be a space for girls to play games that would

allow them to break the stereotypes piled against them and feel included in the overall

culture of gaming that had excluded them for so long.  One such company at the frontline

was Purple Moon, headed by Brenda Laurel and financed by Microsoft Corp.[117]  Laurel

was a notable figure within the field of video game design, working for companies such

as Activision, Atari, and Apple Computer.[118]  Laurel set out on a mission to try and

satisfy the much deprived girl's market for video games.  What was new about her

project at Purple Moon was not that they were just making games they thought girls

wanted to play, but they were conducting research into how girls play and what they

actually wanted.[119]  It turned out that a phrase like "based on extensive research" was no

better in guaranteeing the quality of a computer game as the phrase "years in the making"

did for a movie.[120]  Purple Moon's 1997 release of *Rockett's New School* was extremely

underwhelming in regards to the effort put into the game's development.  "Too much

---

[117] "This Rockett is a Dud," San Jose Mercury News, Oct. 19, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[118] "ComputerLetter," Technologic Partners, Jan. 30, 1997, pp. 1-5, 5,Box 4, Folder 2, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[119] "This Rockett is a Dud," San Jose Mercury News, Oct. 19, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[120] "This Rockett is a Dud," San Jose Mercury News, Oct. 19, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

research" and "not enough thought" were two statements that summed up the game's

shortcomings in an article by the San Jose Mercury News.[121]  The game featured Rockett

and her experience starting eighth grade at a new school, a commonly overused narrative

in early games for girls.  The game focused on players' decisions and the effects they

have on the story.  The article criticizes that, "the program ducks the really interesting

situations.  When a girl suggests sneaking out of school for a smoke, Rockett refuses

automatically.  In a situation involving moral decisions and possible danger, not being

able to control Rockett's response makes you feel cheated."[122]  Despite claims of

extensive research, Purple Moon failed to advocate for young girls' agency within their

game.  By only allowing girls to follow the trope of the socially pleasing schoolgirl,

players were unable to explore these social situations fully and their implications.

*Rockett's New School* was important not because it was a game for girls, rather it was an

example of what girls *did not* want.

One company to later tackle the same issues as Purple Moon was Her Interactive.

In 1995, Her Interactive was created as a subdivision of parent company American Laser

Games in an effort to design video games catered to girls.[123]  In 1997, the company

acquired the license for Nancy Drew from Simon & Schuster to develop an "interactive

[121] "This Rockett is a Dud," San Jose Mercury News, Oct. 19, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[122] "This Rockett is a Dud," San Jose Mercury News, Oct. 19, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[123] Elizabeth Ballou, "The Case Of The Disappearing Nancy Drew Video Games," Kotaku, November 6, 2018, https://kotaku.com/the-case-of-the-disappearing-nancy-drew-video-games-1830256040.

mystery series" based on their character.[124]  Since launching their flagship games *Nancy Drew: Secrets Can Kill* and *Nancy Drew: Stay Tuned for Danger*, Her Interactive have released thirty-eight games with girls in mind.

Up until this point, the predominant games for girls were Mattel's *Barbie* titles consisting of fashion and make-up: traditional feminine interests.[125]  From a 1996 article titled "The hard facts on girls software", President of Mattel Media Doug Glen states, "Targeting girls is not as simple as making the packaging pink and putting a girl protagonist into a traditional game."[126]  Yet Barbie's brand is the epitome of the female gender stereotype: pink, fashion and make-up.  Due to this, Mattel's *Barbie* games have received criticism for not being more educational or thought-provoking.[127]  Companies like Mattel believed they had it figured out, but really what their *Barbie* games did was segregate girls even farther from the overall culture and the idea of inclusive gaming.  By producing games specifically geared toward female gender, they further singled-out and discriminated against girls as gamers instead of offering them empowerment through gaming.  *Barbie's* strategy for girl's games was to translate the toys onto the screen in hopes of achieving the same economic success, but what this did was perpetuate gender

---

[124] Philip Jong, "Adventure Classic Gaming," Megan Gaiser, Carolyn Bickford, Sheri Hargus - Her Interactive - Interview - Adventure Classic Gaming - ACG - Adventure Games, Interactive Fiction Games - Reviews, Interviews, Features, Previews, Cheats, Galleries, Forums, June 12, 2000, http://www.adventureclassicgaming.com/index.php/site/interviews/156/.

[125] Ballou, ""The Case Of The Disappearing Nancy Drew Video Games."

[126] Andrea Haman, "The Hard Facts on Girls Software," Kidscreen, Aug. 1, 1996, Box 4, Folder 1, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[127] Box 4, Folder 1, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

stereotypes of girl's interests from the playroom to the computer screen. This is what Her Interactive sought out to change.

The first game they released was *McKenzie & Co.* in 1995 ("McKenzie" was an acronym for Marvelous, Cool, Kinetic movement, Everlasting friendship, Non-conformist, Zany, Ingenious, and Empowered[128]). The game was essentially a high school dating simulator in which the player must find a date for the prom.[129] Unfortunately, the game mirrored a lot of the same aspects for which Mattel's *Barbie* games were getting criticized such as: make-up, shopping, fashion, and romance. Despite this, the game did well enough for Her Interactive to branch out and try a new style of game.[130] In 1998, they released the first of the *Nancy Drew* series, *Secrets Can Kill* for PC, which prompted the company to adopt their slogan, "For Girls Who Aren't Afraid of a Mouse".[131] Defined as a "point-and-click mystery adventure", girls were now faced with the challenge of solving complex mysteries through the eyes of a relatable female heroine, Nancy Drew.

Nancy Drew has been a well known book series since 1930, appealing to young girls for her "embodiment of independence, pluck, and intelligence" as described by Jennifer Fisher.[132] Started by creator Edward Stratemeyer, he would later pass the series down through his family to keep the stories of Nancy alive.[133] One exception was

---

[128] "McKenzie & Co.," McKenzie & Co. - PC Review - Coming Soon Magazine, accessed September 9, 2020, http://www.csoon.com/issue14/mckenzie.htm.

[129] Coming Soon Magazine, "McKenzie & Co. - PC Review."

[130] Ballou, ""The Case Of The Disappearing Nancy Drew Video Games."

[131] Ballou, ""The Case Of The Disappearing Nancy Drew Video Games."

[132] Jennifer Fisher, "The Mysterious History of Nancy Drew," The History of Nancy Drew, accessed September 16, 2020, http://www.nancydrewsleuth.com/history.html.

[133] Fisher, "The Mysterious History of Nancy Drew."

Mildred A. Wirt Benson, a ghost writer, who wrote most of the original books: 23 out of the first 30.[134]  Benson is responsible for attributing early Nancy books with "the feisty spirit of independence" that reflected her own attitudes about being a woman.[135]  Benson also believed that "girls could do the same things as boys could," which inspired her stories in the early part of the series.[136]  With this philosophy in mind and the longevity of the series, it's a no-brainer why Her Interactive seized the chance to use Nancy as the role model for a technological age of girl gamers.

Intuition, critical thinking, and problem-solving are all terms synonymous with the *Nancy Drew* series of games.  It was a break away from the traditional trifecta of make-up, fashion, and  romance stigma that surrounded games for girls in the 1990s.  Up until this point, it was assumed that girls just were not interested in the same games as boys, or rather technology as a whole was "un-ladylike".  *Nancy Drew* made it so that girls were "sitting at their computers in slack-jawed concentration just like the boys, paving the way for a future of female Bill Gates."[137]  Instead of mindlessly redressing Barbie over and over, girls were exploring dangerous environments loaded with hints and clues in order to solve suspenseful mysteries.  *Nancy Drew* games provoked critical thinking in young girls and empowered them in a fun, educational way.

Her Interactive did not just guess what girls wanted out of gaming, they asked them to join focus groups in order to deliver a uniquely catered experience.  When asked

---

[134] Fisher, "The Mysterious History of Nancy Drew."
[135] Fisher, "The Mysterious History of Nancy Drew."
[136] Fisher, "The Mysterious History of Nancy Drew."
[137] Charles Herold, "Prowling And Spying With Nancy Drew, The Un-Barbie," The New York Times (The New York Times, November 23, 2000), https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/23/technology/game-theory-prowling-and-spying-with-nancy-drew-the-un-barbie.html.

about the games they played at home, an overwhelming number of the girls answered

with games like: Solitaire, Hearts, Minesweeper, Oregon Trail, SimCity; with the

occasional *Kings Quest* and *Merlin's Apprentice* thrown in there.[138]  When followed up

with "why?", one girl answered, "I like most of these games because they require a lot of

thought."[139]  This was a fairly predominant response from most of the girls.  Girls liked

games that made them think, that challenged them to work towards a goal, not mindlessly

dress up a fictitious model.  It is interesting to note that not a single participant in this set

of data listed a *Barbie* series game.  This data suggests that *Barbie* games were only

popular due to the sole fact that they were the only games on the market at the time

specifically designed and marketed for girls.  Marketing games for girls made it easy to

select birthday and holiday presents; just look for the pink box and the job is done.  Her

Interactive's initiatives reveal quite a different narrative as opposed to the assumed

stereotypes of young girls imposed by large companies like Mattel; girls liked to think.

In a New York Times article from 2000, Charles Herold would dub Nancy Drew as the

"un-Barbie"[140]  As a result of this shift in how companies were defining gaming for girls,

*Nancy Drew* proved popular among marginalized girls across the country.  What better

way to redefine what it meant to be a girl gamer than to make girl games synonymous

with a strong and intelligent character like Nancy Drew.

---

[138] Her Interactive Focus Group Discussion Guides, Box 1, Folder 8, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[139] Her Interactive Focus Group Discussion Guides,Box 1, Folder 8, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[140] Herold, "Prowling And Spying With Nancy Drew, The Un-Barbie."

Behind the scenes of Her Interactive stood three women responsible for the series'

success: Megan Gaiser (President), Carolyn Bickford (VP Sales and Marketing), and

Sheri Hargus (Development Manager).[141]  Together, they assured that girls had quality

games that represented them well, not just settling for what men thought they wanted.

Her Interactive did not aim at targeting the female market like competitors such as Mattel

just because they learned that it was there, rather they embraced the market and nurtured

its growth instead of further gendering girls from games through the reinforcement of

stereotypes that were already formed around video games.  The goal was to reinvent how

people saw games for girls, not to continue the stereotype of pink, fashion and romance.

Gaiser states they picked Nancy because she "is a powerful role model - she's brilliant,

intrepid, and successful."[142]  Furthermore, Her Interactive could make games where the

content was non-violent and not relying on gender stereotypes for its success.[143]  Lastly,

the mystery genre allowed players to interact with the content in a more

thought-provoking manner as opposed to mindlessly dragging and dropping clothes from

a cabinet. They also appealed to both boys and girls, evidenced by shows like Scooby

Doo and the Hardy Boys.[144]  In an interview with Gaiser she explains that if girls were

not buying and playing games, rather "it's because few developers are designing games

that appeal to them."[145]  She goes on to blame this stereotypical thinking on "those that do

tend to rely pretty heavily on pink packaging, boy-talk and clothes. To assume that those

---

[141] Jong, " Megan Gaiser, Carolyn Bickford, Sheri Hargus - Her Interactive - Interview."
[142] Jong, " Megan Gaiser, Carolyn Bickford, Sheri Hargus - Her Interactive - Interview."
[143] Jong, " Megan Gaiser, Carolyn Bickford, Sheri Hargus - Her Interactive - Interview."
[144] Herold, "Prowling And Spying With Nancy Drew, The Un-Barbie."
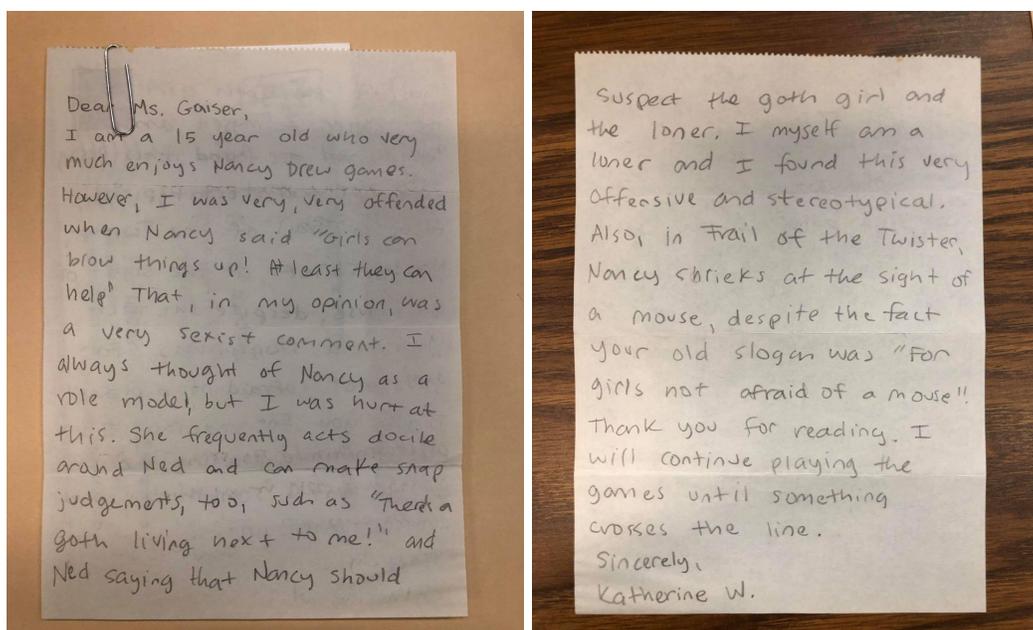[145] Jong, " Megan Gaiser, Carolyn Bickford, Sheri Hargus - Her Interactive - Interview."

are the only things girls are interested in is absurd."[146]  She seems to be directly calling

out *Barbie* for contributing to the gender problem that Her Interactive was trying to fix.

Despite the divide in games for girls, Her Interactive stayed true to their goal of listening

to what girls wanted and delivering on that promise.

Although the *Nancy Drew* games grew popular and approved by both educators

and parents, some young girls had gripes to pick with her.  In a focus group discussion,

when asked what the first thing that comes to mind when someone says Nancy Drew, one

girl said "perfect".[147]  Whoever recorded the notes added that the girls feel that, "it's odd

that she doesn't have anything wrong with her / makes you depressed."[148]  Although the

*Nancy Drew* series of games were a hit among girls and helped to redefine the spaces in

which girls were included in the overall gaming culture, some girls did reveal a lot of

criticism of Nancy and Her Interactive.  Katherine W., a 15 year old fan of the *Nancy*

*Drew* series, wrote a letter to President Megan Gaiser:

---

[146] Jong, " Megan Gaiser, Carolyn Bickford, Sheri Hargus - Her Interactive - Interview."
[147] Her Interactive Focus Group Discussion Guides,Box 1, Folder 8, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[148] Her Interactive Focus Group Discussion Guides,Box 1, Folder 8, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

Letter from Katherin W. to Megan Gaiser, courtesy of The Strong, Rochester, New York.
[149]

Katherine points out what she sees as shortcomings in the representation of girls in

gaming and their empowerment.  She starts off by explaining how she is a dedicated fan

of the game series, yet she is "very, very offended" by some of the dialogue in the games.

[150]  She quotes Nancy as saying, "Girls can[t] blow things up!  At least they can help,"

then explains, "That, in my opinion, was a very sexist comment.  I always thought of

Nancy as a role model, but I was hurt at this."[151]  She has a good point, why can't girls

blow things up?  Why is it that she is only able to offer assistance in this task?  This

---

[149] Letter from Katherine W. to Megan Gaiser, 2011, Box 2, Folder 21, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[150] Letter from Katherine W. to Megan Gaiser, 2011, Box 2, Folder 21, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[151] Letter from Katherine W. to Megan Gaiser, 2011, Box 2, Folder 21, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

stereotype of girls in a support role is not exclusive to gaming, rather its a reflection of a

greater societal understanding of gender roles.  She further points out that Nancy acts

"docile" around Ned, Nancy's boyfriend.[152]  As of 2019, there are 34 *Nancy Drew* titles

for the PC and Ned appears in 17 of them, in one of which he is a playable character

(*Alibi in Ashes*, 2011).  The relationship they exhibit is one of care and support, yet Ned

does fear for Nancy's life when she gets herself into life-threatening situations.  Ned's

main importance in the game for players is to offer hints when stuck on puzzles.   Despite

this, Katherine questioned Nancy's behavior around Ned, which obviously did not go

overlooked.  Katherine was also offended when Ned and Nancy suspected the resident

goth and loner in *Warnings at Waverly Academy* (2009) in which someone called the

"Black Cat" is sending warning letters to students at a female boarding school, leading to

potentially harmful outcomes.  She says, "I myself am a loner and found this very

offensive and stereotypical."[153]  We see that representation in video games of various

social identities is important for players of all sexes and gender identities.  Katherine

points out the shortcomings that Her Interactive might have failed to realize in their game

development.  Just because Her Interactive avoided using stereotypes against girls does

not mean other social stereotypes were left out.  Perhaps one oversight of Her Interactive

was their misunderstanding of the various social identities of girls.  Nancy exhibited

characteristics of strength, intelligence, charm and fearlessness: traits that some young

[152] Letter from Katherine W. to Megan Gaiser, 2011, Box 2, Folder 21, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[153] Letter from Katherine W. to Megan Gaiser, 2011, Box 2, Folder 21, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

girls might be intimidated by or not particularly associate themselves with.  Even though

Nancy was thought to be brave and fearless, Katherin found a glaring contradiction.  In

*Trail of the Twister*, Nancy "shrieks at the sight of a mouse", in which Kathrine reminds

us, "despite the fact your old slogan was 'For girls not afraid of a mouse'."[154]  Her

Interactive's slogan was intended to empower young girls to be fearless in their pursuits,

yet Nancy is exposing an inconsistency with the company's message.  Nancy was

supposed to be a fearless woman, undaunted in the face of adversity, yet she shrieks at

the sight of a tiny mouse, despite the company slogan stating otherwise.  Unfortunately,

there was no comment or response to this young girl's letter in the archives.

It's hard to say for sure, but thankfully Her Interactive made it integral to their

video game production to give girls their much deprived agency in the world of video

game culture dominated by boys and men. *Nancy Drew* proved to be a success in both

terms of its financial profits and cultural impact on gaming.  Nancy was not some

superwoman created to cure the gender disparity in video game culture and technology;

rather she is an early symbol of what girls can achieve in and out of gaming.  Nancy is

only the beginning of the constant struggle of the shaping of gender and its roles for

women in the realm of gaming and technology.

Finding possible solutions for the "girl problem" ranged from reinventing the

wheel with  games to investing in research to find out exactly what it was that girls

wanted in games.   Although companies like Mattel and Purple Moon created games for

girls, this did not solve the problem of female marginalization within gaming, rather it

---

[154] Letter from Katherine W. to Megan Gaiser, 2011, Box 2, Folder 21, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

isolated girls in their own gaming reality set apart from the boys. These games might have been made for girls, but girls were definitely not kept in mind during development from most of the companies during this time. Stereotypes toward girls drove the development of most games for the girl's market, not girls wants. For example, in a detailed periodical by Technologic Partners in 1997, Girl's Games Website revealed that blue was more commonly a favorite color among girls visiting the website; contrary to the heavily stereotyped (and gendered) color pink.[155] The goal for companies should have been to find more inclusive ways to break stereotypes surrounding girls and video games, yet these products proved to make the problem worse in some regards. The periodical also suggested that, "the trick for all these companies will be to meld their sociological views and research findings with products that sell."[156] We see this in the success of gender-neutral games by Broderbund as a way to include girls and women without directly catering to gender-specific interests or requiring years of research. *Myst* went on to be a top selling game for nearly an entire decade until 2000 when it was bested by yet another globally beloved, gender-neutral game, *The Sims*. These games did not market using ridiculous gender stereotypes or cater to one specific audience. The value of the game was simple, they were fun.

---

[155] "ComputerLetter," Technologic Partners, Jan. 30, 1997, pp. 1-5, 5,Box 4, Folder 2, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[156] "ComputerLetter," Technologic Partners, Jan. 30, 1997, pp. 1-5, 5,Box 4, Folder 2, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

# Section 3: Violence and Gender: Gaming Stereotypes Define the Market

The culture of video games in the 1990s was one that was constantly criticized by the media, parents, and even the US government. These social pressures all cumulatively contributed to the mixed public perception of video games and their influence in society: mainly on children.  These pressures also contributed to the shaping of stereotypes that would gender gaming, such as conflating boys with aggression and violence and girls with fashion and romance.  During this decade we see an overwhelming amount of articles identifying the gender gap in the gaming market and potential solutions of how developers planned to address this perceived issue.  We also see public responses to the rise of violent video games such as *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap*, causing the U.S. Congress to establish the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) in response to the spreading fear of their impact on children.  As video games started getting national attention, the social construction of gamers and their identities became more subjected to gender stereotypes.  This resulted in two of the largest questions regarding video games in the 1990s: why aren't girls playing games and will violent video games make kids (specifically, boys) more aggressive and susceptible to committing crimes later?

### Impact of Violence on Perceptions of Gender and Gaming

The debate on violence started in the 1970s over the controversy of *Death Race*, a game in which you drive a car over stick figures called "gremlins" for points.[157]  Parallel to the advancement of graphics and the power of computers, video games were able to move from stick figures and lines to full 2D and 3D animation by the mid 1990s.  This advancement allowed games to look and feel more realistic, which only raised more concern for what would be appearing on screens.  Not only were video games a concern due to their advancing graphics, pornography was also contributing to what we would call "the moral panic".  Pornography, according to Laura Kipnis, was causing a stir amongst religious groups, parents, and even within the feminist movements of the time as it was a "convienient way to symbolize the omnipresences of rape and violence to women."[158]  Meanwhile, "mainstream culture like movies and TV, advertising, pop music, not to mention high art, are borrowing pornographic explicitness, making the distinctions between pornographic and the nonpornographic harder and harder to maintain, if they were ever tenable at all."[159]  This idea that pornography was becoming indistinguishable from other cultural mediums worried parents and activists across the nation that video games were one of these new pornographic mediums.  Not only that, but the negative perspective towards women as sexual objects further degraded the imagery of femininity to some.  These social concerns would eventually be echoed throughout the nation and acquire Congressional attention.

---

[157] Shannon Symonds, "Death Race and Video Game Violence," Death Race and Video Game Violence | The Strong, April 11, 2019, https://www.museumofplay.org/blog/chegheads/2012/05/death-race-and-video-game-violence.
[158] Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), vii, https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/2027/heb.02145.
[159] Kipnis,*Bound and Gagged*, viii.

## U.S. Congress VS Violent Video Games: FIGHT!

In the mid 1980s, Hasbro worked with creator James Riley in order to produce *Night Trap* for their Control-Vision console.[160]  As their aim was to market directly to children, the game could not have any "reproducible violence", as they called it.[161]  The blood-sucking vampires Riley originally imagined quickly were reduced to "augers" who were "toothless vampire-wannabes who used devices called "trocars" to drill into the necks of their victims because they can't bite," as Stacy Ponder would describe them.[162] The player's role in the game is to monitor an all-girl sleepover with undercover teen agent Kelli, played by Dana Plato, as the augers invade trying to extract blood from their victims with the brutal trocars.[163]  What was arguably most shocking about the gameplay was not within the content of the story, but the live-action recording of the actors as the characters in the game.  The realistic graphics resembled that of a movie.  The realistic visuals of the game invoked fear among parents that *Night Trap* was a pornographic game.  Hasbro decided to cancel the production in 1989 due to an inflating budget.  Four years later, Riley released *Night Trap* with Sega.  Sega at the time decided to target a teen audience as Nintendo dominated the more youthful markets.[164]  Sega's marketing strategy did this by targeting "teenage boys with provocative ads highlighting the young victims in the game" with "sexual overtones" and "graphic violence".[165]  The overt marketing

[160] Stacie Ponder, "25 Years Later, 'Disgusting' Night Trap Is Incredibly Tame," Kotaku (Kotaku, August 15, 2017), https://kotaku.com/25-years-later-disgusting-night-trap-is-incredibly-tam-1797864067.
[161] Ponder, "25 Years Later, 'Disgusting' Night Trap Is Incredibly Tame."
[162] Ponder, "25 Years Later, 'Disgusting' Night Trap Is Incredibly Tame."
[163] Ponder, "25 Years Later, 'Disgusting' Night Trap Is Incredibly Tame."
[164] Acks and Costrel, *High Score*.
[165] Acks and Costrel, *High Score*.

strategy was in response to Nintendo's control over the market share of younger aged

gamers.  Sega had to make sure they were getting the attention of their market.

*Night Trap* was brought to Congressional attention alongside *Mortal Kombat*.  Released

in 1992, *Mortal Kombat* made a splash on the scene for its realistic graphics and

over-the-top blood and gore for a fighting game.  It introduced unique characters and an

attention-grabbing new mechanic: the fatality.  This new addition to the game was an

exceptionally brutal finishing move that required players to input a special button pattern

to successfully pull off the move.  Each character had their own unique finisher with their

own unique button pattern.  Fatalities ranged from decapitations, removal of still beating

hearts, torching people alive, and even removing fully intact spinal cords from their

victims' bodies.[166]  Knowing the button combination for a character was a display of skill

and seen as mastery over the game.

Due to the perceived level of violence, both games were put on display in a

Congressional hearing led by senators Joe Lieberman and Herb Kohl in December 1993.

[167]  In an effort to answer the calls by parents across the country, the goal on behalf of

Congress was to maintain the companies' first amendment rights while trying to find a

solution to self-regulate the violence in games to prevent children from obtaining games

deemed too inappropriate for their age. After listening to the nearly three-hour long

session, I came to the conclusion that despite there being reasonable arguments and

points made for the case, there were some concerns with their testimonies as well,

primarily in regard to the conflation of television and video games.  This goes to show

---

[166] Acks and Costrel, *High Score*.
[167] Ponder, "25 Years Later, 'Disgusting' Night Trap Is Incredibly Tame."

how little information people had on video games and the social construction of them.

The committee invited four professional individuals to serve as a panel on the matter of

media and violence as it pertained to children.  Those four were Dr. Parker Paige,  Dr.

Eugene Provenzo, Dr. Robert Chase, and lastly Mrs. Marilyn Droz.

The panel presented some distinct claims about the role of gender dynamics

within gaming and its effects on girls and their interest in technology, as well as on boys

and their susceptibility to violence in games.  These gender stereotypes are highlighted in

the testimonies given during the hearing.  Marilyn Droz, Vice President of the National

Coalition on Television Violence (a private religious organization similar to Focus on the

Family) stated in her testimony that "Boys and girls are very easy to determine which are

girl games and boy games.  Girl games are the ones with the fluffy little bunnies and

they're the games the boys choose not to play… Playing video games has become a

macho boy thing; girls are being trained in dressing Barbie dolls and boys are being

trained in technology."[168]  Her testimony reveals her perceptions and understanding of

how she thinks games are gendered.  She associates girl games as being synonymous

with "fluffy little bunnies."  Even if she did not mean this example literally, the image of

a fluffy bunny is certainly not a threatening one; nor is it the basis of a game she would

imagine boys were wanting to play at this time.  She also states that gaming has reached a

point where it is now dominated by boys and girls are simply just falling behind.  Her

statement does in fact hold up when compared to the statistics of the time regarding girls

and their futures with computing.  By 1995, the percentage of female computer science

---

[168] "Video Game Violence," C-Span, accessed September 14, 2020,
https://www.c-span.org/video/?52848-1%2Fvideo-game-violence.

majors dropped down to about 28%, from the record high of 37% in 1984.[169]  The same data reveals that just a little over a decade later, those numbers would drop to an astonishing 18% for female computer science majors.  Droz's statement regarding technology being understood as gendered male is certainly not wrong.  She further claims, "There are very few women characters of any control or power, the self image that we are giving our girls through the video games is showing them that they are once again sex objects and victims, they have their choice."[170]  This is true in the case of *Night Trap* as the game shows the girls wearing suggestive nightgowns and sports bras running around the house as potential victims to be saved from the "SCAT" team.  Once again we see evidence of a severe underrepresentation of positive role models for girls in video games.  *Night Trap* reinforces the damsel-in-distress narrative, only more objectified than its 2D cousins *Mario* and *The Legend of Zelda*.

For girls in the 1990s, video games often became a child's first experience using a computer, and when that experience failed to accurately represent them, they may have felt put off by it as well as technology as a whole. Eugene Provenzo, Professor of Education at the University of Miami stated in his testimony that if "video games are the first introduction for children into the culture of computing, then we're discriminating against girls by providing them with these consistent negative images because they get turned off to computers at a very early stage and if those are really, if these are tools for the 21st century in a certain sense that they need to master, we're driving them away from these tools and I think that's very objectionable."[171]  The separation of girls from

---

[169] Henn, "When Women Stopped Coding."
[170] C-Span, "Video Game Violence."
[171] C-Span, "Video Game Violence."

computers is more worrying due to the major role computers go on to play in our society. Provenzo emphasizes that computers are potentially a twenty-first century technology that people are going to have to learn to master, but if we continue gatekeeping girls from them, they will be handycapped in their professional, academic, and adult lives. I want to draw back on my reference to the Apple II ad in which it blatantly displays the young boy toying with his female classmate's computer. The ad goes to reinforce this gatekeeping between girls and computers, and the keepers are boys and men. Girls had been slowly pushed out of the technological field for about two decades at this point, and for those already in the field it was made hard for them to stay due to low chances of any upward mobility in their positions. The data and history shows that women were becoming more and more separated from computer technology later in their lives, meanwhile men were constantly involved in the design, production, and consumption of technology and gaming.

Despite these accurate claims, I did find inconsistencies in the testimonies of the panel. For a panel of experts, it concerned me to see that they were perpetuating the gender stereotypes they were trying to advocate against. For example, in the opening scene of *Night Trap*, commander Simms introduces himself to the player and explains the mission, objective and game controls. Before he sends you out on your mission he tells you, "If you don't have the brains or guts for this mission then give the controls to someone who does." Provenzo cites this statement and responds with, "So there's a fascist, military type with a police cap on looking at you and saying, 'if you're not man

enough to do this forget it, you know, you don't deserve to play this game'."[172]  Droz

follows up with a comment stating, "So obviously it's not directed for the other half of the

population."[173]  Provenzo took a gender neutral statement and twisted the entire

perception of the game by associating the game's goal with masculinity.  Having "brains

and guts" is very different from being "man enough", unless he is positing that the terms

are interchangeable.  What is more alarming is that Droz went along with the badly

stereotyped interpretation.

Another questionable statement by Provenzo leaves me to question his knowledge

of video games as a medium when he states,  "what I'm positing here is that there is a

relationship between television violence and the studies there that should be understood

in terms of the new interactive television that these video games represent.  Don't think of

these strictly as video games anymore think of this as a new type of television that is

going to emerge into the 90s."[174]  My understanding of this claim is that video games are

not their own medium, rather an extension of television.  This thought process would

make sense at the time as a majority of the studies presented in the panel's testimonies

were from television research, not video games.  Furthermore, before the issue of video

game violence was recognized, both Hollywood and television were heavily criticized for

the violence on screen.  Perhaps this was what was the most striking thing about *Night

Trap*; it was a live-action video game that bordered the edge of pornography.  The

actresses were clothed in loose, revealing sleepwear while being chased around a house

by creatures with weapons; seen by parents as some sick, twisted pornographic fantasy.

---

[172] C-Span, "Video Game Violence."
[173] C-Span, "Video Game Violence."
[174] C-Span, "Video Game Violence."

Even the music industry implemented "parental advisory" labels for explicit content in 1985.[175] Video games were such a new technology that it was possible that professionals and intellectuals did not know how to categorize them yet except that they are a subcategory of television. Regardless, the main issue here is that video games, which are already perceived to be gendered male, are not only being criticized for their violence, but this violence is being associated with boys and male gender: further cementing gaming as male domain.

In the second half of the hearing, representatives of both Nintendo and Sega presented their testimonies about violence in video games. Howard Lincoln, Senior Vice-President of Nintendo of America asserted:

> "In the past years, some very violent and offensive games have reached the market. And of course I am speaking about *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap*. And let me say that for the record I want to state that Night Trap will never appear on a Nintendo system. Obviously it would not pass our guidelines. This game, which you indicated, promotes violence against women, simply has no place in our society."[176]

His condemnation is no surprise considering Nintendo historically dominated the market for youth gaming as well as raked in about 80% of the total market share for video games in 1992.[177] Intriguingly, in 2018 Nintendo released the 25th Anniversary Edition of *Night Trap* in the Nintendo store for their hit console the Nintendo Switch. It appears that *Night Trap* made its way to Nintendo after all. This could be simply due to Nintendo capitalizing monetarily on the nostalgia of older gamers who remember the controversy

---

[175] Charlie Hall, "A Brief History of the ESRB Rating System," Polygon (Polygon, March 3, 2018), https://www.polygon.com/2018/3/3/17068788/esrb-ratings-changes-history-loot-boxes.
[176] C-Span, "Video Game Violence."
[177] Dave McNary, "Nintendo Announces Record 1992 Sales," UPI (UPI, January 8, 1993), https://www.upi.com/Archives/1993/01/08/Nintendo-announces-record-1992-sales/8149726469200/.

of the game.  Conveniently, the game now meets the standards of being on Nintendo's

platform despite their testimony during the 1993 Congressional hearing stating that

"Night Trap will never appear on a Nintendo system."[178]

Sega's Bill White gave testimony highlighting the company's broad customer

base as well as their efforts toward quelling the concerns that anxious parents had about

video game content with their own rating system for their games.  White remarked that

the average age of a Sega customer was 22 years old and children 13 and under only

represented 5% of their sales.[179]  Sega made it clear who their target audience was.  White

further asserted that Sega implemented a self-rating system on their more mature games

such as *Night Trap*.[180]  Despite this attempt at self-regulation, it was not being reinforced

in stores as well as failing to inform the general public, mostly parents of gamers, about

the content within the games they were buying for young players.

As a result of the hearing, it was decided upon by all parties to create the

Entertainment Software Rating Board--a self-regulatory, non-governmental body--with

the hopes to help guide parents in making responsible choices in terms of video game

content for their children.[181]  In a collection of studies done in 2008, 2011 and 2013,

statistics show that children were twice as likely to get into an R-rated film than purchase

an M-rated video game.[182]  The result of the Congressional hearing was a win-win for

both citizens concerned over the violent and sexual content in video games and the game

developers protecting their first amendment right to put whatever they want in their

---

[178] C-Span, "Video Game Violence."
[179] C-Span, "Video Game Violence."
[180] C-Span, "Video Game Violence."
[181] Hall, "A Brief History of the ESRB Rating System."
[182] Hall, "A Brief History of the ESRB Rating System."

games.  The ESRB was a government created policy that worked, and it worked well to protect consumers from making uninformed purchases on video games for younger audiences.  To this day, the ESRB has been monitoring the content of video games and has successfully done its job; meanwhile the question of gender and its impact on gaming remained to be settled.

## Public Perception of the Gender Gap and Girl's Games

After the issue of violence was quelled by the mid 1990s, the public narrative shifted to addressing the gender gap in video games and technologies as it was just starting to be realized by game developers and marketing teams at the turn of the century. Studies reported that girls were not only less likely to use computers and the Internet,[183] but this problem was contributing to the decline of women enrolling in computer engineering programs in colleges across the nation.[184]  In response to this issue, a variety of software companies such as Purple Moon, Girl Games and Her Interactive set aims at closing the gap with game titles aimed directly at girls.[185]  The late 1990s saw a strong push for girl's games as a means to provide young girls with content they actually enjoyed as well as get them to sit in front of the computer and conquer this perceived fear of technology.

Newspapers have been an excellent source in understanding social norms of a given time period as well as the controversies and resistance that came with it.  It was not

---

[183] Hiroshi Ono and Madeline Zavodny, "Gender and the Internet" (Atlanta, GA: Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, 2002), pp. 1-18, pp. 1.

[184] Henn, "When Women Stopped Coding."

[185] Rachel Beck, "Girl games: Coming soon to a computer near you," Oak Ridger, Oct. 22, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

until the mid 1990s when girls were finally recognized as a potential market for video

game consumption, despite women leading the charge in the video game industry behind

the scenes with little to no recognition.  Suddenly, an outcry for girl's games was

documented in newspapers across the country and game companies were scattering to

answer the call.

Countless news articles discussed the hot topic as nearly two-dozen games

targeted for girls were set to be released in 1997.  When 11-year-old Susan Grossman

was asked about "those slash'em, shoot'em, and kill'em computer games," she responded

with, "They're boring and gross, I don't like playing them."[186]  The article contrasts the

idea of the "traditional boy-oriented games" as being violent and action-packed while

inferring that girls desire something entirely different.  This language alone contributed to

the division of gender within gaming by reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes and

assigning them each to their own market within gaming.  Boys were expected to go play

*Doom* over in their corner meanwhile girls were handed *Barbie Fashion Designer* to play

in theirs.  The article does mention that "on occasion" girls would play *Doom* and *Quake*,

"but many young women also yearn for games that mimic their interests outside the

computer world."[187]  These interests were perceived to be "fashion, friends and fun,"

according to the article.[188]  Senior research analyst William Zinsmeister describes this

---

[186] Rachel Beck, "Girl games: Coming soon to a computer near you," Oak Ridger, Oct. 22, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[187] Rachel Beck, "Girl games: Coming soon to a computer near you," Oak Ridger, Oct. 22, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[188] Rachel Beck, "Girl games: Coming soon to a computer near you," Oak Ridger, Oct. 22, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

emerging market as "a gamble, because we know very little about this market. But if you get the content right...there is a big market opportunity."[189] Unlike capitalists who saw this as an opportunity to capitalize on an "untapped market," critics responded quickly in opposition to these "gender-specific" games as they "do a disservice" to girls.[190] Shelly Pasnik of the Center for Media Education had a very different view on games for girls. She is quoted as stating that, "Some of these games build on the characteristics attached to girls, like pastel colors, fashion as a main topic, problems with friends...They don't open up girls' minds to new ideas."[191] Barbie may have had a successful start, but the games were growing dull and repetitive quickly. Girls were being brought to the computer screens but losing interest fast. The early market for girl's games consisted of this continuous reinforcement of the stereotypes developers and their marketing teams associated with girls and technology and contributed to girls' lack of interest.

One article from the Olean Times Herald in New York covered the opinion and views of women in the STEM field and their responses to games for girls and the gender gap. Most were not sure why the number of women earning computer science degrees dropped nearly 10% in just 10 years, but most attributed it to the "perception common to both sexes that computer wizzes are guys. Nerdy guys."[192] The article then cites Valerie

[189] Rachel Beck, "Girl games: Coming soon to a computer near you," Oak Ridger, Oct. 22, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[190] Rachel Beck, "Girl games: Coming soon to a computer near you," Oak Ridger, Oct. 22, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[191] Catalina Ortiz, "Women in computer field seek more female recruits," Olean times Herald, Sep. 22, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[192] Catalina Ortiz, "Women in computer field seek more female recruits," Olean times Herald, Sep. 22, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

Green, a masters student at Brown University as saying, "It may not matter that more and more computers are in the nation's classrooms...the machines are popular with boys, largely because the majority of game software appeals more to them than girls."[193]  The perception of technology as masculine alone was a deterrent for young girls to engage with early technology.  Green further states that, "Computers can become boys' territory as early as elementary school."[194]  If young girls were at a disadvantage by 1st grade, it explains why the number of women in computer engineering was dropping at such an alarming rate.  This problem was not one that had an easy, clear-cut solution.  The question became: how can games for girls undo nearly three decades of social perceptions regarding technology?

The first step in the right direction was a move away from the traditional Barbie franchise.  In an article by Charles Herold of the New York Times, he writes that, "It's easier to create action games for boys than to answer a question Freud would most likely pose were he still alive: What kind of computer games do little girls want?  The best answer the game industry has come up with is Barbie.  Boys get shooters, sports games, war games and roleplaying games, and girls get Barbie.  It hardly seems equitable."[195]  If Barbie was not what girls wanted then what was?  The later half of the 90s embraced the soaring popularity of Nancy Drew, dubbed by Herold in his article, the "Un-Barbie."[196]

---

[193] Catalina Ortiz, "Women in computer field seek more female recruits," Olean times Herald, Sep. 22, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[194] Catalina Ortiz, "Women in computer field seek more female recruits," Olean times Herald, Sep. 22, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[195] Herold, "Prowling And Spying With Nancy Drew, The Un-Barbie."
[196] Herold, "Prowling And Spying With Nancy Drew, The Un-Barbie."

Nancy was not only beloved by girls, but even mothers were "enthusiastic" about the game, prompting Her Interactive to add adult focus groups to their research methods.[197] Nancy Drew's appeal was not only in her character, but the content of the games. The puzzles were recognized as "good or better than most adventure games." Nancy Drew engaged her audience through critical thinking, story-telling and adventure. Herold makes a bold claim stating, "Boys who believe there is more to life than visceral violence might find they enjoy [*Nancy Drew: Message in a Haunted Mansion*] as much as the girls."

The struggle for representation in games was clearly an issue. *Nancy Drew* was simply tape on the crack. In an article by Donna Ladd, Dr. Janese Swanson, president of Girl Tech, advocated for the necessity of getting girls "good technology," not just the "pink, fluffy Barbie stuff that sold so well last Christmas."[198] She confirms that girls enjoy competition just as much as the boys do, however most of the games in the 1990s "talk down to them."[199] Game characters are typically male, even if they're animals.[200] Swanson argued that this "ingrained sexism" went on to negatively influence young girls in a way that they would "never measure up if they're playing with that mentality."[201]

---

[197] Herold, "Prowling And Spying With Nancy Drew, The Un-Barbie."
[198] Donna Ladd, "What Kids Need," MHJ, www.machome.com, Oct. 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[199] Donna Ladd, "What Kids Need," MHJ, www.machome.com, Oct. 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[200] Donna Ladd, "What Kids Need," MHJ, www.machome.com, Oct. 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."
[201] Donna Ladd, "What Kids Need," MHJ, www.machome.com, Oct. 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

The lack of representation in video games is a critical issue due to its innate relation to other forms of computer technology. If girls felt marginalized from video games, something deemed to be "fun," just imagine how they felt engaging with computers in their academic lives.

<div align="center">What Really was the Gender Gap? Truth or Fiction?</div>

Within the social atmosphere of the 1990s, we see gender and gaming at the forefront of controversy. Statistics in this section showed how young girls typically had a late start with computers which resulted in a drastic decline of women in computer science and engineering fields and professions. The shaping of gender roles and how they interact with technology was critical in this social process. It was a common perception that women were just simply not interested in game development and the consumption of games. However, data shows that by 2001, the percentage of girls playing games was similar to that of boys.[202] If this is so, then why was there such a popular belief that girls did not play games? I believe that the market for girl's games itself perpetuated the idea of gender inequality in gaming culture. Throughout history, segregating people by race and gender has been a sign of ideological views that follow a hierarchical way of thinking. Establishing an individual market for girl games, removes girls from gaming and places them within their own space, separate from boys and their games. This is similar to the social construction of why girls play with dolls and boys play with action figures. The word "doll" carries perceptions of female gender,

---

[202] Mathew DeBell and Chris Chapman, "Computer and Internet Use by Children and Adolescents in 2001," pp. 33, Table 9. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, October 2003), https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/2004014.pdf.

meanwhile "action" infers an association to male gender.  By calling them "girl's games" you are reinforcing the idea that these games are exclusively female and that boys and men cannot enter that space, and vice versa.  As the perceptions of video games became associated with action and violence, they further became associated with masculinity and traits we commonly associate with male gender, therefore markets and developers assumed girls were not interested.  The creation of a female market implies the differences of gender are ultimately the driving force of game development, not creativity and innovation.   In a submission by H. Graham in 1997, she writes about her negative experience with a game developer Sid Meiers:

> I resented Sid Meier's comments concerning gaming and 50-year-old women.  His comment that any game he designed that would appeal to a 50-year-old woman wouldn't be one he would play was insulting.  I have over 150 games for my PC, an old C128 with more than 400 games, a Sega, and a Super NES.  I play everything from *Super Mario* to *Daggerfall*.  I will, however, in the future check the software boxes more closely when I buy.  With Mr. Meier's attitude, any game he designed would be one this 50-year-old woman definitely would not buy![203]

Unfortunately, research regarding women and their experiences playing games like *Doom* and *Quake* are scarce, although I have reason to believe that perceptions of gender did not restrict girls and women from playing these games despite popular social perception of the time.  The submission from H. Graham is one of such rare finds.  Her message informs us that she has owned and played more than five hundred different games on

---

[203] "Write the wrongs of the game industry," Next Generation, Oct. 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

various consoles and computers.  The article concludes with her comment that it, "just goes to show that you can't stereotype hard-core gamers."[204]

Despite gendered games negatively reinforcing gender roles, girl's games did manage to achieve one significant goal: bridging the gap between young girls and computers.  In 2003, the National Center for Education Statistics published its findings on computer and internet usage by children and adolescents in 2001.  The study reveals that despite men using computers and the Internet at significantly higher rates than women in the past, the gender gap has closed for both adults and children with little to no differences in overall computer or Internet usage rates.[205]  The study also states that despite closing the gap, there still remains to be gender differences in Internet activity.  For example, boys between age 5 and 17 reported that 65.4% of them play games on the internet while only 59.1% of girls reported that they did.  Conversely, girls used the internet for school assignments (73.2%) and emailing (67.6%) more than boys (70.9% and 62.4%, respectively).[206]  Despite the slight gaps here, we see that girls were using computers just as much as boys, just not exactly the same way that boys were or the way society expected them to.  A 1997 article from Boston Sunday Herald describes this realization as if  "software manufacturers finally woke up to the fact that there are girls in the United States."[207]  The increase in computer usage by young girls can be seen as a

[204] "Write the wrongs of the game industry," Next Generation, Oct. 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[205] DeBell and Chapman, "Computer and Internet Use by Children and Adolescents in 2001," 7.

[206] DeBell and Chapman, "Computer and Internet Use by Children and Adolescents in 2001," 33, Table 9.

[207] Robin Ray, "All dolled up but nowhere to go," Boston Sunday Herald, Oct. 26, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

result of the initiatives of Her Interactive and software developers like them who helped

to close the gap between girls and technology; using video games as the bridge.

Conversely, Sari Boren, a Cambridge Massachusetts educator explained in an article, "If

girls are already using the computer, I wouldn't buy them girls' software," as, "they don't

demand a lot from the girls."[208]  Although girls software from *Barbie* got girls to the

computer chair, it certainly was not cultivating their much needed computer skills.  This

is why games like *Nancy Drew* became popular among teen girls; it challenged them.

The true intention with games for girls was not to create their own gaming

community separate from the boys, but as a way to bring girls to the technological table

and participate equally with the boys who have had an advantage for decades.  Boren also

stated that she would rather see girls playing *Barbie Print and Play* over Her Interactive's

first title *McKenzie and Co.* because the Mattel game allows girls to be creative and think

for themselves instead of following the trend of "boys and clothes."[209]  The complexity

behind the gender issue was not to make a space specifically for girls to play games

without the interruption of boys, rather it is that games for girls were trying to empower

them to confront and master technology just as well as the boys have been encouraged to

do so since the 1970s.

---

[208] Lisa Greim, "Girls can be computer literate, too," Rocky Mountain News, Sep. 7, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

[209] Lisa Greim, "Girls can be computer literate, too," Rocky Mountain News, Sep. 7, 1997, Box 4, Folder 5, Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, "Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York."

# Conclusion

The history of video games does not receive enough focus for how impactful it is on our society today. As of 2019, there are more than 2.5 billion active gamers around the world; that's nearly 33% of the global population.[210] Video games are one of our fastest evolving technologies and require us to pay close attention to the changes not only with hardware and software, but within the culture of the gaming community itself. I'm honored to contribute further work to this developing field of study and hoping that it may go on to influence future contributions by many more like me.

Since the recognition of gender inequality in computing and gaming, there have been various collaborative efforts on behalf of developers, schools, and the government trying to make technology more appealing for girls. For example, we see initiatives to reevaluate the research on gender and technology by starting to use girls' perspectives as the basis of research instead of assuming the male perspective as the norm.[211] This research provides game developers with more accurate data in understanding why girls were not as inclined to participate in computer culture as their boy counterparts.

This paper has provided a much needed re-evaluation of video game history by analyzing the role gender played in shaping the perceptions of who were playing video games. When talking about the history of video games, it would be incomplete without mentioning Atari. Sadly in this case it was not just the typical story of success and

---

[210] Herman Narula, "A Billion New Players Are Set to Transform the Gaming Industry," WIRED UK (WIRED UK, December 20, 2019), https://www.wired.co.uk/article/worldwide-gamers-billion-players.
[211] Deborah Butler, "Gender, Girls, and Computer Technology: What's the Status Now?," *The Clearing House* 73, no. 4 (March 2000): pp. 225-229, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30189551.

innovation that they spearheaded.  Rather I reinterpret the corporate culture in a way that reveals the inner workings of gender within early gaming development and its effects on the future of the gaming industry for women and young girl gamers.  Women were not respected for their knowledge and programming skills, rather they were  being glorified for their bodies and "exotic" relationship with technology.[212]  The impact of the male gaze not only shaped how video games were seen, but it went on to further perpetuate men as the sole contributor to technological advancement and mastery.  Advertisements were blatantly biased towards the representation and empowerment of boys; like in the Apple II launch ad or the "sexification" of *Computer Space*.  These representations of both men and women and boys and girls, went on to define the gender norms for video game  and computer culture and cement these stereotypes as fact going into the following decades.

When talking about how gender shaped video games it is important to recognize the key actors who attempted to make gaming culture an inclusive one despite the gendered marketing campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s; it was thanks to women like Roberta Williams and Megan Gaiser as well as companies like Her Interactive, Purple Moon, and Broderbund.  Without Williams and Sierra On-Line, we would not have the role-playing games we have come to know and love.  RPGs alone made up 11% of video game sales in the U.S. in 2018, third highest genre on the list.[213]  RPGs went on to impact more than just the market; they helped to define and shape how gender was explored and embraced within video games.  This specific genre allowed marginalized communities

---

[212] Odenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 10.
[213] Christina Gough, "U.S. Most Popular Video Game Genres 2018," Statista, July 24, 2020, https://www.statista.com/statistics/189592/breakdown-of-us-video-game-sales-2009-by-genre/.

like women and queer people to finally see their identities represented through the eyes and bodies of main charcters: charcters that mattered to the plot. No longer were women subjected to being saved by a man nor were queer individuals relegated to the background. Gamers with varying identities were finally able to play games that represented them and were not forced into the shoes of a white, heterosexual, macho-man. Megan Gaiser and Her Interactive innovated how game development saw games for girls. No longer were young female gamers a slave to the fashion industry or the center of attention of school drama and romance; girls were stepping into dangerous environments and risking their lives to find clues through gruelling and challenging puzzles and obstacles, all while playing as a heroine. RPGs and girl games may not have been the direct solution developers were looking for in trying to deconstruct the stereotypes pertaining to gender and video games; but it would be remiss to not acknowledge the leaps and bounds in terms of the progress these women and companies made in their attempts at making gaming a more equal space for all players.

Boys then became the center of controversy in the early 1990s regarding violence and video games; further gendering gaming as a masculine territory. Parents and guardians started questioning the violent and sexual content in some video games: notably *Mortal Kombat* (1992) and *Night Trap* (1992). Both games showcased violence in a way that was never before seen in a video game, through full motion video and realistic graphics. *Mortal Kombat* introduced the "fatality", a finishing move of gruesome cinematic proportions: ranging from decapitations to pulling organs out of the loser's body. Despite *Night Trap* being the result of development aimed at creating a title

with no "reproducible violence," it drew attention for its blatant sexual overtones during a time where pornopraghy was threatening to invade personal computing. These fears reaffirmed gender stereotypes in gaming by associating young boys with a lust for violence and sex. This moral panic had parents, guardians, and Congress up in arms to protect young boys from this exposure. There seemed to be not much of a worry for girls and how they would be affected by this issue. Girl gamers were thought to not like violence or games that would be categorized as "boy games," therefore girls had games made for them. Furthermore, these stereotypes would be magnified in the media as a way to further distinguish between boy's games and girl's games. The media would go on to exaggerate the gender gap in computing and gaming despite the statistics at the time telling us otherwise.[214] Just because video game boxes were not pink with rainbows and closets on them did not mean that girls were not playing games.

After the turn of the century we start to see drastic changes in the perception of women in video game culture. Less female characters were following the narrative trope of the damsel-in-distress or being represented as highly sexualized objects with over-exaggerated physical features for men's pleasure. A big example of this is the rebranding of *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft. Despite being one of the most sexualized and objectified female characters in gaming history, Lara Croft challenges "the binary of vixen or victim" according to Lora Strum.[215] Her "exaggerated bust line began as an office joke among her developers, and was supported by a male-dominated environment," said Teresa Lynch, a communications researcher.[216] In 2015 with the

---

[214] DeBell and Chapman, "Computer and Internet Use by Children and Adolescents in 2001."
[215] Strum, "Study Tracks 31-Year History of Female Sexualization in Video Games."
[216] Strum, "Study Tracks 31-Year History of Female Sexualization in Video Games."

release of another installation in the series, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, lead writer Rhianna

Pratchett made it clear that, "The way Lara is marketed now is not sexualized.  It's still

beautiful, it's still strong, it's still characterful, but it's not sexualized in the way it was

done before."[217]  In the interview, Pratchett admits to being turned off as a young female

gamer due to the explicit sexualization of Lara since her 1996 debut, but she emphasizes

that it is "definitely something that's very, very much in the past."[218]  Pratchett stated that

she signed onto the project in early 2013 with the clear intention to make Lara more

realistic.  This was accomplished through normalizing her body proportions and giving

her pants and a tank top.  She explained, "They're showing you who she is as a person,

rather more than who she is as an object.  She's strong, she's capable, she's empathetic,

she's intelligent. She's all kinds of things we think of as sexy in the real world. So it's not

like she's not a sexy character, but she's just not sexualized, which is the difference."[219]

Embracing Lara's sexuality as a capable and strong heroine instead of objectifying her

for her body sends a big message to female players of all ages.  Instead of getting

attention for being physically attractive as their only noticeable quality, the new vanguard

of video game heroins were making bravery, intelligence, and fearlessness sexy.  Women

began to finally embrace their own gender and use it to empower female players across

the globe.

Another late nod to game development and female empowerment within the

industry was seen in 2016 when Barbie launched a "Game Developer" doll for its "legacy

---

[217] Crawley, "The Sexualization of Lara Croft Is a Thing of the Past."
[218] Crawley, "The Sexualization of Lara Croft Is a Thing of the Past."
[219] Crawley, "The Sexualization of Lara Croft Is a Thing of the Past."

of ground-breaking careers."[220]  The game developer stands next to such notable careers such as nurses, astronauts, scientists, and even president.  The fact that they chose to glorify a game designer as a "ground-breaking" career puts a large amount of emphasis on the importance of this job within our society.  Barbie did help to get young girls to computers in the 1990s, but did not empower them to continue using them past their teenage years.  This doll is perhaps a nod to their missed opportunity in the past and their attempt at redemption.  It makes me question if this doll was launched sooner, if it would have inspired more girls to enter into the computer sciences in adulthood instead of watching the numbers decrease by nearly 20% over twenty years.

Despite these initiatives and changes in the perception of video games from the developmental level, the fight for gender equality within consumer gaming culture itself is not over.  In a 2018 article with BBC Worklife, pro-gamers and professional streamers shared their experiences as female gamers.[221]  The article introduces us to two female gamers.  First is  Stephanie Harvey, otherwise known online as missharvey.  She is a Canadian video game developer and an e-sports player who has won six major international competitions.  Next is  Leahviathan, a live streamer on the popular game streaming site Twitch.tv; where gamers go to watch other gamers play and entertain an audience.  Both women do not ask for "special treatment;" rather they just ask for a level playing field in hopes that the term "girl gamer" will soon become "obsolete."[222]  Being

---

[220] "The History Of Barbie," Barbie, accessed September 15, 2020, https://barbie.mattel.com/en-us/about/our-history.html.
[221] Helene Schumacher, "Harsh Realities of Being a Professional 'Girl Gamer'," BBC Worklife (BBC, April 9, 2018), https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20180417-harsh-realities-of-being-a-professional-girl-gamer.
[222] Schumacher, "Harsh Realities of Being a Professional 'Girl Gamer'."

identified as a girl gamer insinuates gender stereotypes about the player's skill and interests within the games, putting female players at an initial disadvantage.  For Leahviathan, "it's the stereotype of a gamer who isn't there because she's good at games or enjoys games; she's just there because she's trying to impress guys or something. It's not true."[223]  Despite Harvey's involvement for more than a decade, she explains, "I've been doing this for almost 15 years now, and when I started it was extremely male-dominated, especially in pro gaming – it still is."[224]  Just having "miss" in her player name makes her a target for gender based comments and harassment.[225]  She even chooses to compete on all-female teams because earning "respect takes so much time and so much effort, they don't give you that luxury, and they don't want to play with you because they assume you're not good enough."[226]  The solution to increasing the presence of female gamers in development and the community is not by just creating games they specifically like to play but to encourage and empower women to participate in the culture and community freely by creating a ground of mutual respect.  Leahviathan ultimately believes that, "as a female gamer, I don't want to feel like a unicorn... I just want there to be a level playing ground, a level amount of respect. I don't want to be treated specially and I personally don't particularly want companies to be hiring me just because I'm female. I want that to just be normal. I want females to be recognised based on merit, rather than gender."[227]  The desire to just be accepted as normal and not as a "unicorn" or "*deae ex machina*," as Oldenziel would phrase it, was a shared belief among

---

[223] Schumacher, "Harsh Realities of Being a Professional 'Girl Gamer'."
[224] Schumacher, "Harsh Realities of Being a Professional 'Girl Gamer'."
[225] Schumacher, "Harsh Realities of Being a Professional 'Girl Gamer'."
[226] Schumacher, "Harsh Realities of Being a Professional 'Girl Gamer'."
[227] Schumacher, "Harsh Realities of Being a Professional 'Girl Gamer'."

women across gaming and technology.[228]  The first step on the long road to change starts with awareness of the blatant stereotyping that goes into shaping female gender within gaming culture and technology as a whole.

As long as we continue to reinforce gender stereotypes, there will continue to be a disparity between male and female representation in the computer science field, game development and overall culture.  In this paper, my goal was to emphasize the importance of social constructions such as gender and how it contributed to shaping our perceptions of technology: in this specific case, our views and understanding of video games.  Just as many other things in human society became gendered, (such as toys, movies, drinks, colors, and jobs) video games were no different in that our societal perceptions of gender and its norms went on to shape a dichotomy that was not naturally there to begin with.  Being able to reflect on the history of video games with a heightened awareness of the role gender plays in the shaping of its culture should be the grounds upon which we retell this history going forward.

---

[228] Oldenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 11.

# Bibliography

Archives

Her Interactive, Inc. Collection, 1996-2012, Identifier. 113.2102, Brian Sutton-Smith

Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, Rochester, New York.

Abbate, Janet. *Recoding Gender - Women's Changing Participation in Computing*. Mit Press Ltd, 2017.

Acks, William, and Frances Costrel, dir. *High Score*. Netflix, 2020. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81019087?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2Cc9cc4ba 4825fa3c00e62b07305b2dc7e7a762802%3A6d6bceb6e894f4285ccfd90a33affec0bfdbf7 0e%2Cc9cc4ba4825fa3c00e62b07305b2dc7e7a762802%3A6d6bceb6e894f4285ccfd90a 33affec0bfdbf70e%2Cunknown%2C.

Andrews, T.L. "Silicon Valley's Gender Gap Is the Result of Computer-Game Marketing 20 Years Ago." Quartz. Quartz, February 16, 2017. https://qz.com/911737/silicon-valleys-gender-gap-is-the-result-of-computer-game-market ing-20-years-ago/.

Apogee Software, *Duke Nukem*, (July 1, 1991, Aalborg, Denmark, Apogee Software). Video game.

Archive-It. "Patterns of IT Use." The Application and Implications of IT in the Home - Patterns of IT Use, June 29, 2015 (date archived). https://wayback.archive-it.org/5902/20150629134551/http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf01 313/patterns.htm.

Ashcraft, Catherine, Brad McLain, and Elizabeth Eger, "Women in Tech: The Facts," National Center for Women and Information Technology, 2016, https://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/resources/womenintech_facts_fullreport_051320 16.pdf.

Ballou, Elizabeth. "The Case Of The Disappearing Nancy Drew Video Games." Kotaku, November 6, 2018.
https://kotaku.com/the-case-of-the-disappearing-nancy-drew-video-games-1830256040.

"Broderbund Software." FundingUniverse. Accessed September 14, 2020.
http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/broderbund-software-history/.

Buck, Stephanie. "In the Boys-Only Market of Early Video Games, Amy Briggs Built the First One for Girls." Medium. Timeline, March 28, 2017.
https://timeline.com/plundered-hearts-amy-briggs-7c8699847bed.

Butler, Deborah. "Gender, Girls, and Computer Technology: What's the Status Now?" The Clearing House 73, no. 4 (March 2000): 225-29.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/30189551.

Crawley, Dan. "The Sexualization of Lara Croft Is a Thing of the Past, Says Rise of the Tomb Raider Writer." VentureBeat. VentureBeat, November 9, 2015.
https://venturebeat.com/2015/11/09/the-sexualization-of-lara-croft-is-a-thing-of-the-past-says-rise-of-the-tomb-raider-writer/.

D'Anastasio, Cecilia. "GDC Pulls Award After Outcry Over Atari Co-Founder Nolan Bushnell [Update]." Kotaku. Kotaku, January 31, 2018.
https://kotaku.com/gdc-pulls-award-after-outcry-over-atari-founder-nolan-b-1822592638.

D'Anastasio, Cecilia. "Sex, Pong, And Pioneers: What Atari Was Really Like, According To Women Who Were There." Kotaku, February 12, 2018.
https://kotaku.com/sex-pong-and-pioneers-what-atari-was-really-like-ac-1822930057.

DeBell, Mathew, and Chris Chapman. Rep. *Computer and Internet Use by Children and Adolescents in 2001*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, October 2003. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/2004014.pdf.

DeSpira, Cat. "The Time Atari Funded a Porno and Other Things You Probably Didn't Know." Retro Bitch, February 8, 2018.
https://retrobitch.wordpress.com/2018/02/02/the-time-atari-funded-a-porno-and-other-things-you-probably-didnt-know/.

Fisher, Jennifer. "The Mysterious History of Nancy Drew." The History of Nancy Drew. Accessed September 16, 2020. http://www.nancydrewsleuth.com/history.html.

Finn, Geraldine. "Patriarchy and Pleasure: The Pornographic Eye/I." Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory Vol 9, no 1-2 (08-01-1985): 81-95.

Game, Ann, and Rosemary Pringle. *Gender at Work*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1983.

"GayBlade." LGBTQ Video Game Archive, June 26, 2020. https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/games/games-by-decade/1990s/gayblade/.

Gough, Christina. "U.S. Most Popular Video Game Genres 2018." Statista, July 24, 2020. https://www.statista.com/statistics/189592/breakdown-of-us-video-game-sales-2009-by-genre/.

Hall, Charlie. "A Brief History of the ESRB Rating System." Polygon. Polygon, March 3, 2018. https://www.polygon.com/2018/3/3/17068788/esrb-ratings-changes-history-loot-boxes.

Henn, Steve. "When Women Stopped Coding." NPR. NPR, October 21, 2014. https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/10/21/357629765/when-women-stopped-coding.

Herold, Charles. "Prowling And Spying With Nancy Drew, The Un-Barbie." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 23, 2000. https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/23/technology/game-theory-prowling-and-spying-with-nancy-drew-the-un-barbie.html.

"The History Of Barbie." Barbie. Accessed September 15, 2020. https://barbie.mattel.com/en-us/about/our-history.html.

Jong, Philip. "Adventure Classic Gaming." Megan Gaiser, Carolyn Bickford, Sheri Hargus - Her Interactive - Interview - Adventure Classic Gaming - ACG - Adventure Games, Interactive Fiction Games - Reviews, Interviews, Features, Previews, Cheats, Galleries, Forums, June 12, 2000. http://www.adventureclassicgaming.com/index.php/site/interviews/156/.

June, Laura. "For Amusement Only: the Life and Death of the American Arcade." The Verge, January 16, 2013. https://www.theverge.com/2013/1/16/3740422/the-life-and-death-of-the-american-arcade-for-amusement-only.

"Kennedy's New Frontier." ushistory.org. Independence Hall Association. Accessed September 28, 2020. https://www.ushistory.org/us/56b.asp.

Kent, Steven L. *The Ultimate History of Video Games: from Pong to Pokémon and beyond: the Story behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2001.

Kipnis, Laura. *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003. https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/2027/heb.02145.

Kushner, David. "Sex Drugs & Video Games." David Kushner, July 19, 2012. http://www.davidkushner.com/article/sex-drugs-video-games/.

Lien, Tracey. "No Girls Allowed." Polygon, December 2, 2013. https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/12/2/5143856/no-girls-allowed.

Maggs, Brooke. "More Women Are Working in Games - but Gender Bias Is Still an Issue." ABC News. ABC News, July 25, 2017. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-25/games-industry-more-women-working-but-gender-bias-remains-issue/8741744.

Martel, Frances. "Who In The World Is Carmen Sandiego? CEO, Intellectual, & America's Most Positive Latina Role Model." The Mary Sue, February 28, 2012. https://www.themarysue.com/carmen-sandiego-latina-role-model/.

Matulef, Jeffrey. "Myst Connection: The Rise, Fall and Resurrection of Cyan." Eurogamer.net. Eurogamer.net, September 12, 2016. https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2016-08-31-myst-connection-the-rise-fall-and-resurrection-of-cyan.

"McKenzie & Co." McKenzie & Co. - PC Review - Coming Soon Magazine. Accessed September 9, 2020. http://www.csoon.com/issue14/mckenzie.htm.

McNary, Dave. "Nintendo Announces Record 1992 Sales." UPI. UPI, January 8, 1993. https://www.upi.com/Archives/1993/01/08/Nintendo-announces-record-1992-sales/8149726469200/.

Nagourney, Adam. "'Cultural War' of 1992 Moves In From the Fringe." The New York Times. The New York Times, August 29, 2012. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/30/us/politics/from-the-fringe-in-1992-patrick-j-buchanans-words-now-seem-mainstream.html.

Narula, Herman. "A Billion New Players Are Set to Transform the Gaming Industry."
WIRED UK. WIRED UK, December 20, 2019.
https://www.wired.co.uk/article/worldwide-gamers-billion-players.

Oldenziel, R. *Making Technology Masculine: Men, Women and Modern Machines in
America, 1870-1945*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2011.

Ono, Hiroshi, and Madeline Zavodny. Working paper. *Gender and the Internet*. Atlanta,
GA: Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, 2002.

Ponder, Stacie. "25 Years Later, 'Disgusting' Night Trap Is Incredibly Tame." Kotaku.
Kotaku, August 15, 2017.
https://kotaku.com/25-years-later-disgusting-night-trap-is-incredibly-tam-1797864067.

Russo, Charles. "Game Changer: Atari and the Dawn of Video Game Culture." Medium.
THE SIX FIFTY, November 20, 2017.
https://thesixfifty.com/game-changer-lasting-legacy-of-the-atari-2600-4bea9717bf3.

Schumacher, Helene. "Harsh Realities of Being a Professional 'Girl Gamer'." BBC
Worklife. BBC, April 9, 2018.
https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20180417-harsh-realities-of-being-a-professional-g
irl-gamer.

"Sierra History." Sierra History - The Sierra Help Pages. Accessed September 9, 2020.
http://www.sierrahelp.com/Misc/History.html.

"Sierra On-Line, Inc." Company History. Accessed September 9, 2020.
https://www.company-histories.com/Sierra-OnLine-Inc-Company-History.html.

Sito, Tom. *Moving Innovation: a History of Computer Animation*. Cambridge, MA: The
MIT Press, 2015.

Smith, Alexander. "Computer Quiz." They Create Worlds. Accessed September 22,
2020. https://videogamehistorian.wordpress.com/tag/computer-quiz/.

Smith, Keith. Annotated Atari Depositions, Part 1, January 1, 2015.
http://allincolorforaquarter.blogspot.com/2015/01/atari-depositions-part-1.html.

Strum, Lora. "Study Tracks 31-Year History of Female Sexualization in Video Games."
PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, July 8, 2016.

https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/study-tracks-31-year-history-of-female-sexualization-in-video-games.

Symonds, Shannon. "Death Race and Video Game Violence." Death Race and Video Game Violence | The Strong, April 11, 2019. https://www.museumofplay.org/blog/chegheads/2012/05/death-race-and-video-game-violence.

"Video Game Violence." C-Span. Accessed September 14, 2020. https://www.c-span.org/video/?52848-1%2Fvideo-game-violence.

Willaert, Kate. "Pixels In Print (Part 1): Advertising Computer Space – The First Arcade Video Game." Video Game History Foundation, April 10, 2018. https://gamehistory.org/first-arcade-game-advertisement-computer-space/.

Willaert, Kate. "Pixels In Print (Part 2): Advertising Odyssey – The First Home Video Game." Video Game History Foundation, March 20, 2020. https://gamehistory.org/magnavox-odyssey-advertisement-history/.

Williams, Ken. "Introduction to The Roberta Williams Anthology." The Sierra Help Pages. Accessed September 9, 2020. http://www.sierrahelp.com/Misc/IntroductionToRWAnth.html.

Yee, Nick. "Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down The Percentage of Female Gamers By Genre." Quantic Foundry, January 19, 2017. https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/.