

Nicole Epps
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Games that Punish: How Game Developers Alienate Players

The question 'what do women want in a game?' is one that is often asked, but perhaps the better question is what is it that women won't stand for? Women like the same types of games as men. We like shooting, role playing, casual and hardcore games among others. But what turns women (and many men) off, is when games are designed in such a way that they punish players. Women don't put up with these types of nuances like many men will. Many women don't have the time to devote to learning the complex systems that games have become; and while men have the same time commitments to family, school, or work, they have usually already adjusted to game standards. Males, who play a lot of games have often started at a young age and learned these "basics"; game designers take that for granted. Game designers have many ways in which they alienate players who don't fit their mold of the average gamer.

The divide between casual gamers and hardcore gamers is more than just a choice made by the player, it's reinforced by developers who don't think that someone who usually plays casual games would want to play *their* game. So they make a lot of assumptions about who *is* playing and what they already know. My first time playing *Halo* was in my friend Ryan's dorm room. I first watched, and then joined in. It was like going to France without knowing the language. He took no mercy on me. I spent more time staring at the ground and dying than actually shooting at people. I was quite miserable, and the only reason I stayed with it was because I could see the potential fun. My sister, Sundra, likes games too, we play together on the computer all the time. Trying to teach my sister to play *Halo* was not a success, however; she couldn't get enough past the navigation to even want to play the rest of the game. "It was frustrating as hell", she commented afterwards. Sundra notes that in *Halo*, what should be easy isn't easy. In games like *Myst* you're confused, but that's part of the game. You're supposed to work up to understanding. It's not just a matter of taste, either; she likes shooting games. She joked that, "building a garden [in *Viva Pinata*] is fine when you're having a good day, but when you're having a bad day, someone needs to die". Women have the same needs for release and relaxation as anyone else, but games aren't always giving it to them.

In fact learning how to move and look independently is an issue for many people. It took us a long time to learn to do it as a toddler so why would it be easy now? As a result, I end up rarely having

other people who are willing to play with me; finding good partners is a problem for a lot of female gamers. Often their female peers aren't willing to put up with steep learning curves. So is it a matter of making better tutorials? In some cases. Sometimes the design just needs to be improved. What's good for one game, might not be good for another, but often people just take the easy way out. Many games abandon the player after a brief tutorial at the beginning; but as Stuart Pearson says in "Who Plays This Game?", his guide to bringing new players into roleplaying games, "Continue to give her support...but allow some potential to make mistakes, and let her explore the game with increasing amounts of freedom". The art of providing guidance without babying advanced players is one that still needs refinement and attention in the game community. The advantages of improved controls/directions benefit all, not just casual and non-gamers.

There are other issues with learning curves still, however. Even now, when I play *Halo* with Ryan and his friends, who are all immensely better than me, I get frustrated relatively quickly. They play all the time. While I know the mechanics and the techniques, I can barely apply them because next thing I know, I'm respawning somewhere new and foreign. Some games, like *Halo*, punish people who can't afford to devote their lives to them. The rest of the players advance so much while you're gone; people who play sporadically can't enjoy the same games. This creates a divide in the gaming community. Casual gamers get this stigma of not being "real" gamers. Many of these games have lots of detailed and intricate maps that need to be memorized in order to succeed. For example, if you've played a lot, then you know where the best guns are. It's good to reward people who play a lot, but not when it's at the expense of other players. It discourages them from even playing. Why not have guns spawn in different places to level the playing field? Why not have the maps accessible from in the game instead of having to look it up online or in a game book? Why not have bots so that inexperienced players can train themselves without being mocked and made to feel inferior. Even playing *Halo* online with matchmaking, I find that the groups are never equal. I'm tired of prefacing every Halo statement I make with "I'm not that good, but...". I've played a lot of Halo and still I feel like I can't keep up with the multitude of high school boys who have nothing better to do. Games are in desperate need for options for players who can't dedicate their lives to a game. People will turn off the options they don't want, but it's up to developers to make it an option in the first place.

When you assume, as they say, you make an ass out of you and me (that's "u" and "me"). Game designers are constantly making assumptions about their players and it gets them in a lot of trouble. Part of this stems from the fact that most American game developers are white males and they're designing for the entire market; but part of it stems from carelessness which can much more easily be amended. I

recently spoke with a female gamer who was upset at the game *God of War* for its multitude of topless women. The game was punishing her by making her feel awkward—like a sex object, like she wasn't a part of the “old boys club”. She commented how it wouldn't be acceptable to have a game in which all the men had their penises hanging out so why is this game so passable? So did the designers assume that only men would want to play this type of game? Or did they just not care about anyone else? Either option is a pretty naïve viewpoint. This is not to say there shouldn't be games that let men live out this (unrealistic) fantasy, that's not the topic of my discussion, but the game made her feel like an outsider for not wanting to see that type of display. I laud *Halo* for not showing Master Chief's face. While I'm sure I'm not the image of Master Chief that the developers had in mind, it's nice to know that I can still pretend.

Seeing characters that look like you is more valuable than I feel many game developers are willing to admit. I don't need every game I play to have a black female as the main character, but I would feel more comfortable in the game community if some of them did. Every game I see with women characters peaks my interest. Every time I get to choose a character, it's always a female. Almost every Sim I create is some variation of me or the way I wish I could be. Game designers punish players (as well as damage self-esteem) by not making a variety of characters. Then when they do decide to cast a minority as the main character, developers need to do a good job. I'm sick of seeing black characters as gangsters, sports stars, and nothing else. As a real life black person, I know no gangsters; but the industry (and the media as a whole) is in love with the idea of the fierce, uneducated, black man. The topic in and of itself is too grand to fully be explored in this discussion, so I will move on, but blacks and women are playing a lot of games and spending a lot of money, so developers owe it to them to do a good job representing them.

There is a war waging in the game industry; it's between casual and hardcore games. Well perhaps it is not so much of a war as it is a divide, but is major all the same. Even at the Game Developers Conference this year, I could feel the separation. It felt like casual developers had to go off on their own because many of the other talks didn't apply to them. Why aren't the same techniques being used across the board? Telling people that they are different is a good way to keep them different. The industry needs to unite for the benefit of all; if developers started to see the value that each side had to offer and utilized similar design tactics in their games, the entire game market would grow because casual gamers would play hardcore games and vice versa. Presently, it seems as if casual gamers would have a hard time crossing over into hardcore games if they so desired. Some casual gamers play the games they do because they're easy to play. Should that be the way it is? That casual games pick up the

slack? Sundra comments that she plays games like the Sims because “you make it what it is”, instead of a designer telling you what it is. There's no pressure like in many hardcore games. The reason there's less women playing is because they don't see anything for them. Pearson says the advantage of new players is that “you're effectively starting with a clean state that you can fill up with game rules, house rules, inspiration, enthusiasm, interest” and love for the game. These players don't have the same preconceptions as seasoned players. Not only do developers punish players, they punish themselves in the long run, because they restrict their audience.

What if women aren't the demographic? What if people who don't play a lot of games simply aren't who a particular game is made for? In my opinion, this is a very uninformed viewpoint to take on any game as a developer. Simply from an economic standpoint, it makes sense to appeal to the largest market of people as possible. Even if women aren't your specific demographic, realize that many women are the ones buying your games for their sons. Women control the cash flow in many families so it would be foolish to think that they don't pay attention to what they buy. I think it's alright to have gender specific games, but if there is a lack of quality product to fill the void that you create, then it is your obligation as a game designer to actively close the gap widening in game products. For the future of the industry it is vital to supply consumers with what they need and not just what you are willing to give them.

A lot of times game developers get caught up in the notion that women simply like different types of games. While there is truth in this, I think what is more true is that women can't keep up with the shots being taken against them in modern games. Older games like *Pacman*, *Super Mario Brothers*, and *Pong* don't have the same type of player divide. Women played them (and still play them) with as much frequency as men. This is because everyone enjoyed these games equally. They were *designed* for everyone. Present day game developers are relying on the casual market to “take care” of the women, but women enjoy the same types of games as men. They just want to be acknowledged in the characters, the design, and the story of the games. A few months ago, my parents got a new computer. My mother casually asked me to install “that civilization game” on it so that she could play in her spare time. I was shocked, but she saw me and my sister playing and said that she thinks she might like it. I desperately want my mom to start playing computer games. My sister and I bonded over games like *Myst* and *The Sims*, so I know my mom would understand me better if she started to play games too. I'm scared that she might get turned off by her first bad experience, although. I don't want her to think all games are hard if the first one she encounters is tough. This discussion doesn't merely apply to women, however. There are tons of people out there who see games that “seem cool”, but they are timid to try to play

because of past experiences, or because they feel like outsiders stepping into a forbidden domain. It is up to the game industry to alleviate these misconceptions and to make gamers of all ages, sexes and colors feel welcome to play.

Works Cited

Pearson, Stuart. "Who Plays This Game?" Dragon. Oct 2002.