Video gaming is for boys. Don’t agree? Neither do the 40% of gamers who are women. In fact, women over 18 now outnumber boys under 17 in online gaming communities (Yee et al). Yet, in spite of the large percentage of female gamers, men outnumber women on video game covers 13:1, 60-73% of games prominently feature male characters (as opposed to 2-12% featuring females), and female characters in the games are much more likely to be sexualized and much less likely to be playable (Phillips et al). This indicates that most game companies, at least the ones selling packaged console and computer games, market primarily to males. But is cultivating male players over female ones really compatible with these companies’ objective? After all, cutting out half your potential audience doesn’t make good business sense. Game companies base their marketing strategies on both real and perceived player demographics, so perhaps the real question is this: why is video gaming seen as a male-specific pursuit?

The reasons for this are manifold and cyclical—reinforced by as well as reinforcing gender stereotypes. Firstly, it is often obvious from the games themselves that the expected audience is male, either by the lack of playable women characters or the overly sexualized way in which the female characters are presented. Secondly, societal expectations of passivity and nonviolence in women can cause girls to avoid the multitude of violent games, whether or not they enjoy playing them, in order to maintain the appearance of pacifism. Finally, men vastly outnumber women in programming fields, so most games are created by male programmers based on what they would like to play, which are then marketed specifically to the audience the programmers had in mind: male players like themselves. The combined result is a self-perpetuating cycle that alienates female players from console games and consequently limits female participation in the programming fields that create these types of games.

For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on packaged games designed for PCs and gaming consoles, which make up the majority of the market for video games today. These games can be divided into two categories, which I will call “free-character” and “locked-character.” Free-character games allow the player to create and customize the character they will play from a variety of options, while locked-character games require the player to use a pre-defined character and point of view—usually following a particular storyline. Most MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) games, such as World of Warcraft are free-character, whereas many action or FPS (First Person Shooter) games are either locked-character or have very limited character customizability.

In locked-character games, women disappear almost entirely. An excellent example is L.A. Noire, which made Amazon’s “Bestsellers in Video Games” list by April 23, 2011 despite the fact that the release date was May 17. I watched several trailers for the game, and I counted 28 men and 3 women depicted in them. All of the men were shown doing something related to the story line. Two of the women were dead, and the third was only shown screaming. Another game, New Super Mario Bros initially looks more promising, featuring mostly genderless turtles, until you realize that the storyline is about a guy rescuing a princess—the archetypal damsel in distress. The portrayal of women as nothing more than victims to

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**Building Characters**

by Kelly Barksdale

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be rescued may not turn away every female player, but the implication that women are weak or helpless makes it hardly surprising that these games are more appealing to male players than female ones.

Call of Duty: Black Ops and Brink are even more interesting: although the trailer for Call of Duty and the product description for Brink both brag about the levels of character customization, I have decided to include them in the locked category. The trailers for these games claim that “it’s completely limitless, the kind of ideas that you can come up with for creating your own online identity,” (Call of Duty) and a player will be offered “a near-endless combination of looks for [his or her] character,” (Brink), but this “limitless,” “near-endless” customization does not include the ability to make your character female. As far as I could tell from the trailers, neither game features any female characters whatsoever, despite the fact that Brink takes place on an ark described as “humanity’s last refuge” (Brink). If humanity’s last refuge consists entirely of men, our species is surely doomed. One could argue that the complete lack of female characters in Call of Duty can be attributed to an attempt at realism, since women are not allowed to serve in combat positions in the armed forces, but why should games insist on realism in this regard, when so many other elements in video games depend on pure fantasy? Games are meant for play, for pretending, for trying things you wouldn’t or couldn’t normally do. By refusing to even imagine the presence of women, not only in combat roles but in war zones entirely, these games help reinforce the societal expectation that all women should be passive and leave the fighting to men.

Many free-character games offer a bit more accessibility to female characters, but even here gender stereotypes dominate the genre. Many free-character games are RPGs (role-playing games), in which players create an avatar that they use to move around and interact with the game world. In many games, players can choose between several species, each of which has its own strengths and weaknesses. For example, in World of Warcraft (WoW), character options include Worgen, Draenei, Dwarves, Gnomes, Humans, Night Elves, Goblins, Blood Elves, Orcs, Tauren, Trolls, and Forsaken. The amount of choice involved in character creation constitutes an important draw of RPGs, because it allows players to fashion a virtual identity and, in a sense, recreate themselves. However, it doesn’t take long to realize that the choices these games offer to players are more restrictive than they originally appear. While WoW allows players to choose the gender of their avatar, the basic body shape for each gender is fixed, and the physical differences between the genders are highly exaggerated. In nearly every species, the females are far smaller than the males in much starker proportions than the average human differences. As you can see in the picture below, the shoulders of each male figure appear at least twice as broad as the shoulders of each female. In addition, the males are all strikingly muscular, while the females have a distinct hourglass figure. Because these are fantasy games, there is no reason the creators couldn’t have depicted the genders of
made-up species in diverse and unusual ways, but they are all strikingly similar.

This tendency has not gone unnoticed by female players of WoW. Andrea Rubenstein, the administrator of the Iris Gaming Network, wrote that, “given such a diverse range of races, one would expect that there would be a similar range in body types. Instead, the ‘diversity’ in men is whether they look like slim bodybuilders or huge ones, and for women it reads much like the shallow diversity in Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty.”

Whether or not you think the Dove campaign successfully celebrates a diverse range of body types, a quick glance through WoW characters will support Rubenstein’s complaint about the game. Interestingly, as Rubenstein herself notes, the species that are farthest from humans are more, not less stereotyped. It is as if, given the freedom to invent new body forms, the creators withdrew ever more firmly into the old western ideals of beauty.

Why exaggerate sexual differences? Because players like it that way. In earlier versions of WoW, the Troll and Tauren races featured genders with very similar body models, but players complained that the females were ugly, so Blizzard changed them. One could argue that this complaint stems from basic gamer psychology: as psychologists Jane Barnett and Mark Coulson point out, research has shown that players tend to choose “aesthetically pleasing races that appeared to represent ‘good’ (e.g., tall and attractive elves) rather than ‘evil’-looking green-skinned orcs and similar ‘monster’ races,” thus bringing real world stereotypes into fantasy games. Because players use avatars to represent themselves within the game, it makes sense that they would want to create characters that will represent them positively. But if players simply wanted good-looking characters, why would they only complain about the female avatars? The male Trolls and Taurens haven’t changed much between versions, though they can hardly be considered beautiful. It seems that WoW players are willing to accept at least some monstrous body types for male characters, but are unwilling to accept the existence of similarly monstrous female characters.

Is this because WoW players are predominantly male? Perhaps. According to The Daedalus Project, an organization that conducts surveys and examines demographics of MMORPGs, 84% of WoW players are male, so in this situation real demographics match the designers’ perception. But by demanding less variety in the game’s female characters, the player base has helped to create a game world where male players can choose a wide variety of body types to represent their virtual identities, but female players are locked into a tiny narrow range of possibilities, all of which exhibit highly sexualized physical charac-

Figure showing the changes made to male and female character models in World of Warcraft characters between the Alpha and final versions of the game as a result of player complaints.
teristics. This creates a cyclical effect in which new female players, alienated by the limited choices offered to them by the game, might be less likely to take it up, thus perpetuating the gender imbalance among players.

This effect is exacerbated by the fact that men are also more likely to use avatars of the opposite gender, so that while only 1% of the male characters in online games like WoW are played by women, fully half of the female characters are played by men (Yee). The acronym-loving computer world even has a name for this phenomenon: GIRL, which stands for Guy In Real Life (Lee). Perhaps the simplest reason for male gender-bending in videogames is that many guys would rather look at a female character than a male one. As gamer and blogger Ted Lee writes, if a guy is “going to have to stare at a character’s backside all day it might as well be attractive.” This would certainly explain the tendency for female characters to resemble models; indeed, some female players point to big breasts and revealing clothing as a way to identify a man behind a female avatar (Slagle).

Sexual appeal is not the only reason for men to play as females, however. Part of role-play is getting to pretend to be someone you aren’t or allowing yourself to show parts of your personality that you are afraid to show in real life. In modern society, it is more acceptable for women to dress and act like men than the other way around, but video games provide an outlet for men to dress and act like women in a socially acceptable way. In the virtual world of video games, men who consider themselves less stereotypically masculine can experiment with feminine traits and styles of interaction without being ridiculed. Interestingly, the fact that such a small percentage of WoW players are women may help to make male gender-bending more acceptable. Historically, when women were not allowed to act, the theater was a place where a man could pretend to be a woman without raising eyebrows. Once women began acting, men were no longer needed to play women’s parts and were not expected to want them. Perhaps an influx of women in games such as WoW would cause GIRLs to be less tolerated. Thus, men who use RPG games for gender experimentation may benefit from continued gender inequality.

Beyond the character models, though, the actual content of these games favors a male demographic, and video game companies do very little to resist this bias. In the vast majority of video games, the action and story revolve around violence and war, concepts with heavily masculine connotations. All of the games I have discussed condone and even reward violence. Brink and Call of Duty are shooter games, where the point is basically to kill as many people as possible, WoW and Starcraft both involve battling various kinds of foes, and trailers for L.A. Noire suggest that players must use violent interrogation techniques and get involved in shootouts. Even in Mario Bros, which is rated E (Everyone), players shoot fireballs and jump on enemies’ heads. This emphasis on violence can deter female players for reasons that have little to do with the games themselves. Historically, people have considered violence, war, and aggression masculine activities, and passivity, nurturing, and gentleness feminine ones, but categorizing people is not that easy. In fact, observation of girls and boys playing violent games has suggested that both are equally enthusiastic about killing. However, the same experiment found that girls, conscious of societal expectations, try to maintain an appearance of nonviolence and passivity, even while destroying monsters, whereas boys use adeptness at gaming to impress and gain status among their peers (Walkerdine 92). This difference in the way society perceives violence—as appropriate and even admirable in boys but unacceptable in girls—turns girls away from violent video games as a means of entertainment, not because the girls are intrinsically pacifistic, but because society expects them to be. Once again, however, the design and marketing strategies employed by game companies...
only perpetuates this cycle. By incorporating few if any female characters, by limiting the depiction of female characters to gendered stereotypes, and by focusing their marketing on male players, game companies only further convince girls that violent games are not for them.

In recent years, this phenomenon—of girls avoiding certain types of video games because they too believe that such things are for boys—has finally gotten the attention of game companies, but not to the desired end. Some game companies, realizing that they lose buyers by marketing only to men, have begun manufacturing “girl games,” but since these games often focus on fashion and popularity and comprise only a minuscule fraction of the market, some argue that such practices are actually a step backward. Imagine: Sweet Sixteen is a prime example. This Nintendo DS game comes in a sparkly pink box with the following description: “You’re about to turn 16, and you’ve just joined a new high school. How will you become THE girl to know? By planning, promoting and hosting the most awe-some Sweet Sixteen parties ever—including your own!” (Nintendo). Now we have a game with plenty of girl characters, but we’ve run across the opposite problem: this game makes no effort to appeal to boys. Game designer Ernest Adams writes that, “by creating a category ‘for girls,’ you ghettoize the girls... All the games in the pink boxes are consigned to one area. Children are very sensitive to sex-differentiation issues, and often assume that they are mutually exclusive. Once a girl learns that some of the software is for girls, she’s going to figure that the rest of it is for boys... Why not just make good games for everybody?” Good question.

Perhaps the developers just don’t know how to make games appeal to both sexes. The field of programming remains heavily male-dominated: a survey conducted in 2005 by the International Game Developers Association found that only a little over 10% of game developers are women (Wong). A video about the production of Brink showed only one woman on the production team. If programmers are creating the kinds of games they themselves would want to play, then it should come as little surprise that the games are geared towards men. Some developers may even like to play as GIRLS, and so they have a motive for continuing to create games that appeal more to guys, in that the current gender imbalance may make in-game gender bending more acceptable. I expect that by evening out the numbers of men and women in computer science fields we could move a long way towards Adams’s goal of “good games for everybody.”

It is important to consider that women and girls are not the only victims of exaggerated stereotyping in these games. Not only do players repeatedly see passive, sexualized representations of females, but they also see aggressive, muscle-bound depictions of males. As Ted Lee notes:

Females in fantasy genres generally fall into the magical and religious roles, but they can also play as assassins and helpless royalty, as powerful paladins or demure druids... But the male persona in fantasy is generally hyper-masculine... infused with the dreams and desires of the alpha male in a fraternity. They are generally warriors; they are generally muscular and powerful; they are usually rash and have a destiny to fulfill.

The feminist point of view from which I and others have criticized these games does not exclude the similar injustice done to male players, who, though at least present in the games, have stereotypes thrust upon them with equal force. Some guys use female avatars simply because they find the hyper-masculinity of the males intimidating or because they believe the male characters preclude complexity. They and others who use female avatars for fun may find that increased numbers of women players make their gender-bending less acceptable, but they might also find that breaking down the gender biases in the gaming industry opens up a more comfortable variety of male characters as well as female ones.
Regardless of who it would benefit or hurt, though, there is little need to worry about the effects of a gender revolution in gaming at present. According to research done at James Madison University, the number of women in technological fields is actually declining (Anderson, et al.). However, many institutions have noticed the problem and are working toward encouraging women to enter the engineering and programming fields. Women in Computer Science (WICS) programs have sprung up in schools around the country, trying to entice women to pursue degrees in computer science and engineering. Whether the answer to videogame sexism lies in getting women to join the programming workforce or the answer to the workforce imbalance depends on reducing sexism in the games is yet to be determined, but one thing is certain: if game makers want to create games that appeal to everyone, they are going to have to start considering the interests of both genders more thoroughly than they have in the past.

Works Cited