Girls Just Want to Have Fun

Jeanne B. Funk

The world of popular video games is a man's world, with a few sexy and tough female tokens. Violence is often interspersed with negative gender portrayals. This paper will explore how such portrayals may affect girls and their video game choices, and address the implications of these choices.

It has been proposed that gender portrayals in video games may affect children's gender identity (Cassell, 1999; Dietz, 1998). The mechanisms for the development of gender identity are well-established, with the concept of gender schema central to this process (Martin, 1991). Simply put, a schema is a cognitive structure composed of groups of memories of past experiences which are stored together as expectations, interpretations, and behavioral guidelines. A specific schema is activated by a related new experience. When this occurs, more attention is paid to new information which is consistent with the existing schema, thereby strengthening the existing schema. New data may be ignored or distorted when they do not conform to an established schema.

By about age three, most children understand that one is either a boy or a girl. By about age seven or eight, children have a reasonably stable sense of gender stored as a gender schema, and a beginning understanding of the implications, possibilities, and limitations of their gender. The gender schema dictates what behaviors are appropriate for males and females and influence gender-relevant information-processing. Girls have somewhat more flexibility than boys in some respects, one common example being girls' less rigid rules about clothing: Girls may wear pants, but boys may not wear a dress.

A gender stereotype is an over-simplifed, widely-held, but in large measure inaccurate, part of one's gender schema. For example, one gender stereotype is that a girl's worth is determined primarily by her appearance, the ideal body type being thin, yet busty. When gender stereotypes are present in video games, stereotyped attitudes may be reinforced in any individual, male or female, who chooses to play. It is easy to see how gender stereotypes may be activated by popular video games (Funk & Buchman, 1996). Examine the game box of one of the top-selling games. You will likely see a male with a weapon, and possibly a well-endowed damsel in distress. If you happen to choose "Tomb Raider," you will see an underdressed buxom female with a weapon. Both pictures are likely to be attractive to males, and basically consistent with schemas for male behavior (being aggressive or scrutinizing good-looking females). Neither picture is likely to be appealing to females because they invoke the gender stereotype that women are brainless and helpless, or that power for women is dependent on sexual appeal (Dietz, 1998; Provenzo, 1991). If you choose to play one of the top-selling games, you will likely be required to use ruthless competition and

violence to succeed. For males, these activities have considerable social approval. For females they do not.

For younger children, under ages 10 to 12, playing games with negative gender stereotypes may affect how they view themselves and others if these stereotypes are accepted and integrated into an existing gender schema. Children of this age do not yet have a mature gender identity, and this is one argument for limiting the availability of certain games. Even at older ages, children and adults may be affected by negative gender stereotypes present in video games as such portrayals may strengthen what would otherwise be weak behavioral expectations and interpretations. For example, an individual with a predisposition to view women as less capable than men may hold that belief strongly after playing video games in which women are portrayed as brainless victims.

When video games present negative gender stereotypes and other expectations which are inconsistent with established gender schemas, many girls choose not to play. This may explain girls' generally lower time commitment to game-playing. Lower time commitment may have implications outside the arena of leisure activity: Much concern has been expressed about girls having limited early access to the technology introduced by video games, considered to be a key precursor of computer literacy (Calvert, 1999; Canada & Brusca, 1991). Several solutions have been proposed. Although gender schemas are not easily altered, children can learn to allow exceptions to common prescriptions and proscriptions (Calvert, 1999). It is somewhat more socially acceptable for girls to assume male roles than for boys to assume female roles, therefore, maybe girls should just be encouraged to play violent and gender-stereotyped games. Or, should the genre of "girls' games," those with content more consistent with female gender schemas, be more heavily advertised and supported? Alternatively, perhaps "androgynous" games should be developed. These options are at the center of conversations on gender and gaming.

Defining Game Content and Game Preferences

In order to understand girls' video game choices it is important to establish content categories. For the most part, adult experimenters have defined game content from their adult perspective. To examine content from the child's perspective, Funk (1993) consulted children and adolescents to develop a system of categories with standardized definitions. The current version of the category system is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Revised Video Game Categories with Descriptions

Category	***Descriptions***
General Entertainment	Story or game with no fighting or destruction
Educational	Learning new information or figuring out new ways to use information
Fantasy Violence	Cartoon character must fight or destroy things and avoid being killed or destroyed while trying to reach a goal, rescue someone, or escape from something
Human Violence	Human character must fight or destroy things and avoid being killed or destroyed while trying to reach a goal, rescue someone, or escape from something
Nonviolent Sports	Sports without fighting or destruction
Sports Violence	Sports with fighting or destruction

Note. From "Video Game Controversies," by J. B. Funk and D. D. Buchman, 1995, *Pediatric Annals, 24*, p. 93. Copyright 1995 by SLACK, Inc.

In surveys with over 1,000 fourth through eighth graders, children used these categories to describe their game preferences (Table 2) (Funk, Buchman, & Germann, 2000). Children were asked to list up to three favorite games and then use the definitions provided to choose the category that best described the game's content.

Table 2

Percentage of Favorite Games in Each Category by Gender and Grade

	Fourth		Fifth		Sixth		*Seventh*		*Eighth*	
-	*Girl*	*Boy*	*Girl*	*Boy*	*Girl*	*Boy*	*Girl*	*Boy*	*Girl*	*Boy*
	n = 289	*n* = 241	*n* = 197	*n* = 187	n = 157	*n* =169	*n* = 126	*n* = 177	*n* = 166	*n* = 183
General Entertainment	14.0	6.3	16.8	5.9	16.0	8.9	33.3	7.3	28.9	14.2
Educational	17.6	2.9	24.4	4.3	8.3	3.6	1.6	0.0	5.4	.5
Fantasy Violence	32.7	27.5	30.5	26.2	44.6	24.9	43.7	24.9	44.6	19.1
Human Violence	11.5	25.0	10.2	26.2	16.0	26.0	7.1	29.4	7.2	20.8
Nonviolent Sports	9.3	17.9	12.7	19.8	10.5	20.1				
							4.3[a]	38.4	13.9	45.4
Sports Violence	14.7	20.4	5.6	17.6	5.7	16.6				

Note. n refers to number of games listed. [a] When seventh and eighth graders were surveyed, there was only one Sports category.

In many respects these preferences reflect gender expectations if not gender stereotypes. Girls preferred general entertainment and less realistic fantasy violence content, while boys preferred realistic human violence and sports games. Across all grades, however, about 10% of girls' preferences were video games they described as having realistic (human) violence. Interestingly, these are often the games which also have negative gender stereotypes.

In another survey, children were asked to respond to statements about whether specific types of games and game-playing habits were appropriate for girls and for boys (Funk & Buchman, 1996). Most fourth and fifth grade girls asserted that games with violence should be available for girls to play ("the fighting games"), whether they choose to or not. Boys disagreed, with over half of those surveyed asserting that "the fighting games are mainly for boys." Popularity was also linked to game-play, with a majority of girls and boys disagreeing with the statement, "The most popular girls spend a lot of time playing video games." These responses suggest that gender expectations influence children's video game choices.

It has been suggested that girls seek different types of stimulation from video games than boys (Bruner, Bennett, & Honey, 1998; Kafai, 1996). Small single-

gender focus groups were conducted recently with fourth and fifth graders (Funk, Jenks, & Bechtoldt, 2001). Consistent with our previous surveys, girls in the focus groups reported a preference for games with fantasy (cartoon) violence and an adventure theme, as well as abstract violence (such as crashing cars). However, even when the game content seemed violent, girls defined them as "action" or "adventure" games. One "action" game was described as follows: "…there's these ghosts, and they try to bump into you…there's three lives and it's like if it touches you three times, then you're dead". Many similar examples were given, with the girls consistently asserting that the content was "not violent." The girls distinguished between games where "there's actually something you have to do" from those where "all it is you're sitting down there, trying to fight this other person. There's no adventure to it. You're just sitting there fighting this person." In similar focus groups, fourth and fifth grade boys consistently stated a preference for the more concrete, realistic human violence, especially "first person shooters" which emphasize direct competition, often to the death. These boys readily labeled what appeared to be violent content as "violent," probably viewing this as highly socially acceptable for boys. Perhaps girls in the focus group chose "action" as their descriptive in part because they believed this would be more gender-appropriate for them than "violent."

Implications of Game Content and Game Preference

Girls in the focus group spontaneously reported a sense of identification with game characters, "I feel like I'm the guy who I'm playing. .. I don't know why, but you feel like the other guy, and it's like your life," and "You want to do almost everything your character wants to do." Children often look to the media for role models. It is obvious that many popular video games do not present optimal role models for girls, rather, females typically have subservient and sexualized roles. However, our surveys indicate that some girls do choose to play games with violence and negative gender stereotypes, perhaps because these games also have elements of action and adventure that make them fun to play.

Games made specifically for girls portray a more complex picture of the female role, including competence and power. "Girl" games typically have character-centered plots, and rely on themes of friendship and social relationships (Cassell, 1998). Why haven't such games achieved greater popularity? Maybe because many girls are looking for games which also push them to take risks and where there is a chance to be absolutely and unequivocally dominant. There may be unintended consequences to gender-specific software: girls may be less likely to benefit from developments in the gaming mainstream if they believe that only "girl games" are appropriate for them. The question remains, to be successful, must video games reinforce negative gender stereotypes? As suggested by Cassell and Jenkins (1998), the best solution may be to develop "gender-neutral" games which do not rely on stereotyped content for their appeal and are fun to play. This remains a challenge for the gaming industry.

As adults, we worry about hidden messages and unintended consequences, as we should. It is possible that playing popular video games with negative gender stereotypes may limit both girls' and boys' ability to accommodate a range of personal roles and a range of expectations of others. That is something that adults need to recognize and work to change. Engaging games that do not rely on simple plots based on violence or exploitation must be developed and promoted. For now, we know that children will continue to play whatever games they find enjoyable, likely ignoring offensive content (though perhaps still being affected by it) and focusing on the action and challenge. This may not be judicious, but sometimes girls (and boys) just want to have fun.

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