Girls̶ Women Just Want to Have Fun -
A Study of Adult Female Players of Digital Games.

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ABSTRACT

In the past twenty-five years, the production of digital games has become a global media industry stretching from Japan, to the UK, France and the US. Despite this growth playing digital games, particularly computer games, is still seen by many as a boy's pastime and part of boy's bedroom culture. While these perceptions may serve to exclude, this paper set out to explore the experiences of women who game despite these perceptions.

This paper addresses the topic of gender and games from two perspectives: the producer's and the consumer's. The first part of the paper explores how Sony represented the PS2 in advertisements in Ireland and how adult female game players interpreted these representations. The second part goes on to chart the gaming biographies of these women and how this leisure activity is incorporated into their adult everyday life. It also discuses their views about the gendered nature of game culture, public game spaces and game content; and how these influence their enjoyment of game playing and their views of themselves as women. These research findings are based on semi-structured interviews with two marketing professionals and ten female game players aged 18 and over.

The paper concludes that the construction of both gender and digital games are highly contested and even when access is difficult, and representations in the media, in console design and in games are strongly masculine these interviewees were able to contest and appropriate the technology for their own means. Indeed 'social networks' were important in relation to their recruitment into, and sustained playing of, digital games. At the same time, the paper found that these interviewees were largely 'invisible' to the wider gaming community and producers, an issue raised by Bryce and Rutter (2002:244) in an earlier paper, which has important implications for the development of the games industry.

Keywords

Gender, computer games, video games, social networks.

INTRODUCTION[1]

European surveys point to a significant age, gender and class bias in the ownership of games consoles and the use of computers for entertainment/gaming purposes [9, 13, 17].

A survey conducted by Livingstone (2002) of 1,287 6-17 year olds in the UK found that almost two thirds of houses had a TV-linked games machine [9:37-38]. This rate of penetration was behind the United States, at 82 percent, but well ahead of most of the rest of Europe (2002: 53)[2]. The study also found that social class and gender were significant factors in relation to ownership of a games console; almost three – quarters of boys compared to around half of girls had a games machine at home, and working class families were more likely to own a games machine than middle class families.

Gender is also an important factor in relation to use of game consoles. A US study of almost 3,000 children in 1997 found that boys, particularly 9-12 year olds, spent about three times as many minutes per week playing games compared to girls and it tended to replace television viewing for them. This study also found that males tended to prefer sports games while for other genres there was no significant gender/genre relationship. The study also noted the disproportionate share of less educational and more violent games being played by low-income and minority children [17]. Finally, a study in Belgium of 1,000 9-11 year olds between 1994-1996 defined almost ten percent of their sample as heavy computer game players (>2 hours a day) [13]. These players tended to be male, were more likely to come from working class backgrounds and had lower academic results. Interestingly they were also heavy television and video viewers but read significantly less than the others.

These surveys would appear to suggest that ownership of a games console, game preferences and frequency of play are related to the male gender. A number of qualitative studies would support these findings including [2, 3, 7, 14, 18]. Indeed both Haddon (1993), Bryce and Rutter (2002) and Wright and Briedenbach 2002 would add that many public game spaces are male-dominated and act to exclude female gamers and fuel the perception that playing digital games is a male preserve. Initial attendance at the first Irish MegaLan in April 2003 where 60 game players played multiplayer online games for a weekend and the Sony sponsored Tekken tournament reinforced this finding; not one female took part in either. Interestingly, Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) seem to attract quite high percentages of female players (20-30 percent) and the research conducted by Taylor [15] suggests that the social spheres provided by games like EverQuest can be more inviting and pleasurable for female players.

The absence and/or invisibility of females as consumers is mirrored in the games industry; something the industry is making some moves to address. This has led to the establishment of a 'Women in Game Development' committee by the

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International Game Development Association (IGDA), marketing campaigns aimed at women and games designed for women[3]. Indeed there are accounts of girl-only game development companies in the United States established to develop games for girls and alternative types of games [3, 8]. However these strategies are the exception and to date have been only partially successful.

> 'The number of women employed in the game development industry is thought to be dramatically low, probably between 5 and 15%. While more research is needed, it appears that the percentage of women game developers has shown very little growth over the past several years. Though programmers are only one of many game development roles women may fill, it is notable that, according to ACM, the percentage of women currently graduating with CS degrees is going down, while in all other science areas the percentage is going up.'
> http://www.igda.org/committees/women.php Accessed 9/01/2003

With so few women working in the development of games and the lack of female players at public game events it would appear that more research is needed in order to understand more about why so few females are attracted into this industry and culture. Or indeed perhaps the question should be why are so few females visibly participating in the wider games community? This case study is a contribution to our understanding of how some women perceive and negotiate game marketing, game culture and game content.

Research Questions & Methods

Four key questions underpinned the research project on which this paper is based.

In order to locate a sample which was distributed geographically, in terms of social class and age profile it was decided to post an ad on an Irish website www.irishplayer.com[4]. This website offers reviews of games on all platforms and game

1. *To explore the social construction of a 'gamer' in media representations and the gender dimension of it.*

2. *To explore the issues faced by females in terms of both entering and participating in the games culture.*

3. *To explore the pleasures that females obtain from playing digital games.*

4. *To explore the relationship between game playing, computer usage and profession.*

related news. The editor of this site kindly offered to create a banner on the front page of the site, which would link to a page with information on the research project and a form, which people could send to the researcher if they wished to participate. The initial banner on the front page read '*Female Gamers, please click here.*' This was posted in November 2002 and four women responded. Without prompting the editor changed the wording of the banner to '*Are you a female gamer? Maybe you can help us.*' The next day three responses were received and the changed wording seems to have helped. Following this things went quiet again. This may have been because women infrequently used the site, because the women using the site did not wish to be interviewed or because Christmas intervened.

During the research period it became apparent that labeling oneself as a gamer and associating oneself with the range of meanings that people attached to that term was an issue for many females. This issue is returned to later in the case study and

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[3] http://www.igda.org/women/
[4] Unfortunately this website has now closed down.

certainly people had a range of responses to the question 'would you call yourself a gamer?' It also developed in discussions with people who were asked 'do you play digital games?' In many cases, I had to explain that I was interested in females who played any type of digital game, on any platform, with varying frequency – interestingly, this did not seem to correspond with interviewees own perceptions of what a gamer was.

While the website assisted in sourcing women living in Dublin it did not help to locate women elsewhere in Ireland: many of the females who responded lived in the UK, the US and Canada. Similarly, it did not help to broaden the age or class profile of the sample. The women were all aged between 18-30 and all were currently studying or had received a third level education. On reflection this was found to reflect the age, class and geographic distribution of the Internet in Irish homes[5]. Certainly the class profile of these respondents does not correspond with the class profile of the surveys outlined in the introduction [9, 13, 17].

Other interviewees were sourced through word-of-mouth. The staff of the www.irishplayer.com website were especially helpful here. As a result two of the women subsequently interviewed wrote game reviews part-time for irish-player.com and another girl worked in a games localisation company in Dublin. While initially I was wary of the fact that the women were working with games as well as playing them as a pastime, it turned out to be very useful in that they had been exposed to a wide range of games they might not have played otherwise.

In terms of sourcing interviewees through my own social networks it was interesting that none of my colleagues who worked in IT related jobs or who played on my local sports teams were able to put me in contact with any women who played computer games and none of my sister's colleagues (aged 24 years) could either. Finding female gamers over 18 proved more difficult than anticipated and the fact that each interviewee could not provide me with another name of a female friend who played – a classic research technique - points to the invisibility and perhaps the low overall percentage of women in the games culture in Ireland. In the end I approached females in local shopping centres and placed posters in game shops.

This research paper is based on two interviews with professionals who market games, one male and one female, and ten interviews with females aged 18 and over who play games on any platform. The two professionals who market games were involved in the launch of the PS One and the PS2 in Ireland and the development of advertising campaigns designed specifically for the Irish market. All but one of the ten player interviewees lived in the greater Dublin area, although half of them spent their childhoods and teenage years in rural or smaller urban areas (see table 1.) The oldest female interviewed was thirty and all had played games for at least ten years. Eight of the interviews were conducted in person and two were conducted using Internet relay chat. The face-to-face interviews were recorded and transcribed later for analysis. See Table 1 at the end of the chapter for details of the player interviewees.

It is important to note at this stage that the interviewees were all women who were willing to present themselves as gamers or, at least, females who play games. They may have been less critical of games marketing, game culture and game content than female non-players and lapsed players.

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[5] 11.   O'Donnell, S. News Consumption in Ireland and the European Union: Traditional Media Vs the Internet. *Irish Communications Review*..

Representing Gamers in Advertising and Console Redesign.

In communications and cultural studies there is a wide literature examining the production of meaning in advertising through words and images, i.e. the signification process [1, 16]. The work of du Gay et al. [5] reminds us that the meanings associated with an artefact can be expanded by associating it with different discourses or semantic networks. In their research, for example, they explored the multiple meanings associated with the Sony Walkman and constructed through advertising: Japanese technical know-how, modernity, youth culture, street style and mobility. In addition to this semiotic approach there is also a growing literature which argues that it is important to understand the contexts of production and consumption in order to understanding the meaning(s) of an advertisement [12].

There is some evidence that producers of consoles and games are using advertising to try to enroll females into the gaming community as consumers. What is interesting about these campaigns is the language and visual imagery used in them, the unusual venues where they are launched and the channels used. For example, Microsoft specifically targeted women with its pre-Christmas 2002 Xbox campaign in Japan [4]. Their campaign was aimed at females aged 20-40 and instead of focusing on game content the campaign focused on the console as good value for money and as a multiple entertainment device e.g. the DVD and Ethernet facility. In addition, Microsoft planed a series of 'hands-on' events in their Xbox café, located in a stylish shopping area in Tokyo. While we do not know how successful this campaign was, this targeting of women in particular is rather unique in relation to console marketing and in contrast with the more common strategy which tends to target men specifically or adopt a more neutral approach to gender and target everybody, at least overtly.

In this section we are going to examine the launch of Sony's PS2 in Ireland in November of 2000 and the associated television advertising campaign. A spokesperson for Sony Ireland stated that it markets its PS2 to both males and females and, as with the Xbox, they market the PS2 not as a gaming system but more as an integrated entertainment system, which plays DVDs and CDs as well. The choice of a phrase like 'entertainment system' rather than 'gaming system' is deliberate and points to attempts to move beyond the hard core gaming market to a wider age group and to female consumers as well. The PS2 is marketed to the 18-34 year old age group while the PS One has evolved into a console for a younger age group. Data provided by Sony Ireland indicates that the highest percentage of PS2 consumers are in the 20-25 years of age bracket while the largest percentage of PS One users in the PAL territories is the under 10 age group followed by the 10-12 years age group[6] (SCEE (Ireland) 2002).

In Ireland the Amárach Consumer Trendwatch quarterly report (June/July 2001) found that of 1,000 adults surveyed aged between 15 and 74 years, 32 percent owned a games console. The most popular was the PS One followed by the PS2 (Personal Communication)[7]. According to Sony, Ireland has the highest per capita rate of PS One ownership outside Japan at 38 percent (Personal Communication). This penetration rate seems to be continuing with the PS2 where Ireland has a 10.6 percent penetration rate, while the UK only has an 8.4 percent penetration rate (SCEE (Ireland)). Sony has an 80 percent market share in Ireland and their strength is at least partially based on the fact that they maintain an office employing 16 people in Ireland

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[6] PAL territories refer to Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

[7] Unfortunately, as this information is contained in a private report information on gender and social class were not made available to the researcher.

while none of their console competitors had an office in Ireland until late 2002. Sony also spends significant amounts of money on marketing and localising campaigns for the Irish market. When the PS One was launched in Ireland in 1995 the company created an original television advertisement for the Irish market rather than show the global television 'creative'. The Irish office at the time believed that the central television advert was too 'hard core' and 'too niche' for the still embryonic Irish market. Sony believes that they have (note the choice of 3rd person pronoun):

> 'Opened up gaming to be socially acceptable…. Because pre-PlayStation gaming was 14 year olds, spotty kids, locked up in his room on his own. A social outcast… PlayStation now fits in with all your normal entertainment experiences and it has become accepted, it is now an accepted form of leisure entertainment.'
>
> (Spokesperson for SCEE (Ireland) Ltd.,)

By the time Sony launched the PS2 in 2000, the company held a considerable market share in Ireland and felt the market was ready to accept the company's global television advertisement. However this was only one element in a cross-media and cross-venue campaign. Over €1.26 million was spent in Ireland on advertising the PS2 on Irish television, in national and regional press, on the web, in university washrooms, on bus shelters, in nightclubs and on a high profile press launch. In an interesting counter to the risqué images and language of their advertising campaign the company also moved to address any debate about the negative influence of games. As such, they came together with the film censor and the Minister for Justice to launch an age classification system for games in Ireland. The company seems to have been trying to create two images: an exciting/risqué/cool image with their consumers and a responsible, locally involved and caring corporation with public bodies and parents.

The PS2 launch campaign was more about associating certain cultural meanings with the PS2 and differentiating it from other consoles than it was about informing people about the technical characteristics and specifications of the console. One interviewee, who worked on the launch of the PS2 in Ireland, explained that much of their work revolved around brand positioning and maintaining the 'cool', 'quirky', 'trendy' image, which Sony was carefully developing around the product. As with the Sony Walkman, the PS2 was aimed at a young adult age group (18-34 years) and the channels used to communicate with this target audience reflected this, i.e., post watershed advertising, late night alternative news shows, radio presenters, music magazines and nightclubs. While this interviewee admitted their market was predominantly male she argued that the campaign they developed tried to achieve a gender balance.

> 'realistically it is very much a male domain, however, we have to be very careful in our marketing of the PlayStation …that there is no gender bias.. that is their strategy.'   (A PS2 launch employee)

David Lynch, best known for art house films like *Blue Velvet* (1986) and the television series *Twin Peaks (1990)*, directed the 30-second television advertisement used to launch the PS2. The gritty black and white ad follows a nervous looking man through the corridors of a strange place. Horror type sounds, camera jiggle, extreme close-ups juxtaposed with distance shots and rapid editing set the mood. A women dressed in white signals to be quiet. We then see the man's head floating away from his body as it moves to a space where there are three seated characters; one normal looking human, one human sized duck in a suit and one human wrapped in bandages. There is no music, just the 'horroresque' sounds and random words emphasized with a lot of reverb. The duck then speaks directly to the camera saying 'Welcome to the Third

Place.' This is followed by a distant screaming of 'PlayStation Two, The Third Place' as the PS2 logo appears in blue. Sony is not mentioned.

For this researcher the ad was both surreal and attention grabbing. Much was made of the fact that it was directed by David Lynch whose trade marks are to the fore in the use of strange frequency noises, dark environments, distorted characters, strob lights and dreams[8]. The fact that the ad was shot in black and white was curious given its connotations of veracity and documentary but in this context it served to add to the surreal feeling of the ad and traded on the trendy, 'edgy' status of David Lynch. The form (editing, camera movement) and content (surreal characters, words) all connote a surreal world of dreams where anything is possible and there is an underlying current of darkness and absurdity. The duck speaking direct to the camera has an air of authority emphasized by the suit. 'The Third Place' appeared to be a parallel universe where entertainment and life plays by its own rules, an underground, unconventional and alternative place where people can escape from their mundane everyday lives.

A press release at the time noted that the first and second places are work and home and the Sony PlayStation is meant to take you to a third, personal place of entertainment. When asked if any particular advertising campaign stood out for them, all except one of the game players identified 'The Third Place' ads. At the time it has to be noted that there was very little console and game advertising on mainstream television channels and this added to the uniqueness of the PS2 ads. All the interviewees were very positively disposed to them, even if they all had a slightly different interpretation as to what they meant. So the ad seems to have succeeded in terms of raising brand awareness with this group, but they did note it didn't make them want to rush out and buy the console – surely the ultimate aim of the campaign.

Indeed Sony's self-reported gender neutral approach was only partially successful in terms of encouraging women to buy PS2s and as such, is clearly not an example of a successful inclusion strategy. According to Sony's own data (2002) across the PAL territories only 6.7 percent of PS2 registered owners are women. Indeed a spokesperson for Sony felt that as the PS2 was only on the market two years this percentage of female ownership was quite high. While grouping figures under the broad heading of PAL territories tends to flatten out differences between countries it is interesting that in Japan the percentage of female registered users rose to 11.1 percent for the PS2. Clearly however, in the PAL territories women are less likely than men to purchase a PS2 and register that they have done so.

Of course the decision to buy a console, which on release can cost up to €300 euro is motivated by a number of different factors. Interestingly the redesign of the PlayStation into the PS One may provide some insight into these factors. The Sony Ireland interviewee noted that the registered user base of the Sony PlayStation in Ireland was originally almost 90 percent male. However, when the Sony PlayStation was redesigned, repackaged and re-launched at a new price point in 2000 the percentage of female purchasers and registered users of the console rose from 10 percent to almost 20 percent. While women were not targeted specifically by the re-launch Sony felt that price and size/shape were crucial motivating factors for female consumers.

> 'If you look at the female population and the male population they have different likes and different wants and different needs and what is a priority for a guy is different from a girl obviously. And I think affordability was crucial to PlayStation where yes a lot of females were playing PlayStation, they didn't own one, but they were playing it. Because they didn't see the merit in going out and buying one of these when they could be buying makeup or

[8] http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000186/bio

clothes or whatever. So I think when A) the size and shape went down into a nice cute little, nice baby machine, I think that obviously helped because aesthetically it looked really, and was very appealing, and the prices came down as well. So it was affordable and the games are very affordable. There are entry level games of about €12 so the whole thing became much more affordable so they were saying well actually I can fit this into all my other wants and needs and I think that was crucial.'

<div align="right">(Spokesperson for SCEE (Ireland) Ltd.,)</div>

So is it all about size, shape and price? Interviews with female game players suggested it was not quite so simple. One of the interviewees said she preferred the new size and price but also pointed to the great range and quality of games available on the platform. Two noted that they found the shape, size and colour of the Xbox to be quite masculine and that was off-putting. By contrast the PS One, the Gamecube, and the Nintendo handhelds were seen as much more attractive. The PS2 was seen as somewhat ambiguous and in between the more masculine and feminine consoles. Even in this small sample of ten females there were some for whom size and shape were not an issue but range of games and price were.

Affordability was an issue mentioned by all the interviewees. Of the ten girls interviewed none had paid full price for a new PS2. One had bought a PS2 when the price was reduced, one had bought a PS1 and PS2 with reductions from working in a game shop, one had part paid for a PS1 with her brother. Of the other seven interviewees one had won her PS One and PS2 in competitions, one had received a PS2 as a valentine's day present and the other five played on consoles owned by brothers, boyfriends, work or friends. It would appear that price is particularly an issue for those who are buying a console for the first time and may be crucial in persuading people that they can afford to buy a second console for a house where it is proving difficult to negotiate access to the main console/television. For teenagers and students the PS One was more affordable whereas families with more than one child were more likely to save up together for a PS2 or receive it as a present from Santa. Double income households were also more likely to buy a more expensive console. Interestingly all interviewees thought that game consoles were far too expensive and they were quite happy to let their brothers/boyfriends spend their money on them as long as they could gain access to them. Another factor may have been that on launch when consoles are at a premium price there is usually only a limited number and range of games available on the platform. Range of games is a factor which will be discussed in the next section.

For these ten females most of their money was spent on music, clothes, pubs/clubs and eating out. Where the female did not drink or go to pubs/clubs they were more likely to spend their money on games – an interesting finding given the tendency for companies to market in clubs. Even in relation to games the girls rarely owned more than five games and many of these were bought at discount prices, were X-rental games, swapped games, cheap copies, games won in competitions or games acquired in return for writing reviews. In fact there seems to be a myriad of ways of obtaining cheap games and regardless of whether the interviewee was a student, unemployed or working they still tried to obtain cheaper games.

'E - The PC is kind of a family PC. The PS2 is my little brother's (he never uses it!) and the Xbox is my boyfriend's dads (we got it for him for Christmas and have been sneakily playing it when he goes to bed…)
Q- I know you are not working at the moment but would you buy many games yourself when you were working?

E – I try not to buy them new, as they are so disgustingly expensive. I exchange them.'

(Erika- 25 years old, unemployed)

Price, design of console, range of games and extent to which one socialises outside the home clearly influence the extent to which females purchase game consoles. We will come back to these issues in the next section but it is interesting to note that Sony Ireland conducts market research in Ireland on their registered user base. Since females are a very small percentage of this base this method does not capture information on females who don't own a console themselves. The females who were interviewed in this case study are clearly invisible to Sony as a company and they are not represented in the information Sony uses to plan marketing and strategic campaigns. Despite attempts at maintaining a gender balance in advertising Sony also admitted that they were only really interested in hard core gamers who buy games on a weekly/fortnightly basis. Even the more committed female games in this sample do not buy games that regularly. Further, gender-neutral advertising for consoles must be seen in the wider context of more gender specific advertising of specific games across all media. So despite the reported desire to keep console advertising gender neutral we must question the extent to which Sony is genuinely interested in enrolling more female game players. Certainly the redesign of the PlayStation had the unintended consequence of encouraging more females to buy and register themselves as users of the PS One. In order to understand the other factors influencing enrolment and socialisation we will now turn to the personal stories of the female game players.

Social Networks, Translation Terrain and Invisibility

'That's all they really want
Some fun
When the working day is done
Girls-- they want to have fun
Oh girls just want to have fun'
http://www.cyndilauper.com

'even if you are not playing and it is just people around you playing, it is kind of time when you unwind, chat away to people and you know, kind of have a laugh, as opposed to being in work, or being in college, or … the hecticness of going out.'
(A 22-year-old student, Interview 3.)

'It is just fun, you know. It is not even escapism or anything like that, it is just fun to play it, to be that character, to figure out these puzzles and whatever.'
(An 18-year-old student, Interview 4.)

The title of this paper comes from a well-known song by Cyndi Lauper but the words resonate with the description my female interviewees gave of the experience of playing digital games. Playing games for the ten interviewees is fun and a means of relaxation after a hard day working and a good way to pass one's time when one is unemployed or on holidays. In this section we will examine a number of factors which influenced interviewees to become involved in playing and to continue to play digital

games. There were however two factors which were viewed as critical in relation to the inclusion of women in the games culture:

1. Existence of an 'offline' social network of players and player visibility
2. Range and quality of games.

With regard to the first issue, it would appear that the existence of a local circle of friends and/or kin who played games and offered easy access to game platforms, games and advice strongly influenced initial enrolment into playing digital games and to a lesser extent influenced whether one continued to play. For these interviewees recruitment into this community came between the ages of 6 and 10 years and was usually the result of having fathers, brothers or male friends who played. Continued participation depended on having brothers, sisters, cousins and friends who played. Indeed during childhood it seems that both boys and girls enjoy the same games and the same platforms which included: the Atari, The Commodore 64, the Amstrad, the Sega Megadrive and the GameBoy while the games played were: *Mummy Maze*, *SuperMario, Pac-Man* and *Sonic the HedgeHog*. For these girls the fact that their female friends didn't play was not an issue, it was something they did at home with their brothers, mainly, and sometimes with another sister. Interestingly, none were recruited in their teenage years or later.

Interviewees recalled that it was generally their mother who policed how many hours were played and made sure game playing did not displace housework or homework. Interviewees got around the rules and regulations by playing at friends' houses or indeed exploiting their parent's lack of knowledge about game systems by convincing them that the game would break if they paused it! These facts point to the importance of social networks in maintaining patterns of play and suggest that there is an important generational gap with regard to the meaning and use of games machines in some homes[9]. All of the interviewees commented on how their parents **could not play and did not seem to understand digital games**.

Once they became teenagers, the interviewees who lived in larger urban centres, spent time playing games and hanging out with friends in arcades. The arcades were seen as cool places to hang out at lunchtime or after school. Interestingly they all reported that the arcades were places for both males and females, where one player might play and three or four friends would watch and chat. By the time they reached 18 the girls stopped going to the arcades and started to hang out in pubs and cafes. They also had less time on their hands as they attended college, worked, or both. Less committed gamers recalled how they might 'get out of the habit' of playing when there was no community of players available. Continued participation depended to some extent on the maintenance of a local, and physically accessible community of friends who played – as brothers or interviewees left home, new college friends, work colleagues or boyfriends helped to maintain the interest. This informal network was important in terms of informal education, offering access to a network of skilled players, advice on new games and on how to overcome obstacles in games. The more committed interviewees supplemented this offline network with information gained from websites, magazines and television shows.

The domestic context in which the interviewees lived also influenced their game playing patterns. Five interviewees lived with their parents or a single parent, four

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[9] Both the importance of social networks and the issue of the generation gap and its influence on the meaning and use of media technologies are discussed in detail by Sonia Livingstone 9.

Livingstone, S. *Young People and New Media. Childhood and the changing media environment.* Sage Publications, London, 2002..

interviewees lived with their boyfriends and one interviewee lived with friends. Living at home and with friends imposed more limitations on where, how often and how long one played although again the interviewees came up with strategies to overcome these limitations. In particular if the console was connected to the television in the sitting room the interviewees had to accede to the viewing patterns of their kin. For some it meant going over to friends or boyfriends houses to play or getting another television so they could play in their bedrooms. For the interviewee who lived with friends a practice had developed whereby players took turns to play and the joypad was passed clockwise around the sitting-room, between the men and women, and the console was switched off when a favourite television programme was on. Living with only one other person, a partner, seems to have been easier to negotiate and if both wanted to play a two-player game was rented. Indeed cohabiters tended to buy games that they could play with their partners and a console was preferred because it could be placed in the sitting room and was deemed more sociable than playing computer games on a PC in another room.

For all interviewees, excluding interviewee six who was unemployed, the amount of time spent playing had decreased as work and other obligations absorbed more of their time. At the same time there is clearly a relationship between their being game players, their attitudes to technology, their technical proficiency and their chosen work area. While none of the interviewees were programmers, they were technically astute users of technology who viewed computers as just another media in their lives. All the interviewees lived in multiple screen entertainment media households with two – six televisions, stereos, videos, radios, game consoles/DVD players and half had personal computers although few had it connected to the Internet at home. All worked with computers and the Internet in college or the workplace. Interviewees related stories about assisting their fathers and mothers to programme the video, doing up the family accounts on the computer or stepping their male cousins through a game that they had already completed. At the same time none of the interviewees played PC games much, and none had any interest in programming or tinkering with the insides of computers. In other words, playing console games was not an automatic route into learning about computer systems, networks or programming. These interviewees were clearly working more with the interface and content rather than the programming side of ICTs. The students interviewed were studying film production, journalism and communications, social care, management and marketing and two of these wrote reviews of games for a games website. Interestingly, all of interviewees who worked were employed in ICT/games related jobs including games localisation, web content management, product management in a games software company and part time in a games shop. For three of these females work encouraged game playing, during and outside of work, and work should be seen as an important part of their social network which facilitated their continued participation in this cultural activity. While many of these interviewees worked in ICT related jobs it is interesting to note that the plug and play nature of console games, or their convenience as one interviewee put it, was a key attraction.

While these interviewees were competitive with themselves and their friends/kin none had taken part in formal tournaments or gaming competitions in Internet cafes. Most pointed out that they did not want to be humiliated by others with much better skills and they did not see the point of playing to gain some sort of elevated status amongst strangers. Two had taken part in informal tournaments in work and enjoyed the banter and competition in that context. One of these did note that she and the other female participants did not seem to be able to compete on an equal footing with the male participants. In response they set up a female only competition so

they could improve their skills and at some stage return to compete on a more equal footing with the more experienced male players. Only one interviewee had bothered to fill out a feedback form to send back to a game development company and given that half did not own the consoles they played on interviewees were clearly invisible from an industry perspective and indeed from the perspective of the wider online and public digital game playing community.

Game Preferences

The range of game content available on certain platforms is clearly an important factor, which influences the continued participation of these interviewees and console purchasing habits. When asked what platform they preferred, and why, most responded that they were PlayStation (1 or 2) fans and they loved the games, graphics and convenience of PlayStation consoles. One interviewee preferred the graphics and one particular game on the Xbox but admitted that the range of games was better on the PlayStation. Range of games is important from another perspective too – in terms of accommodating the different tastes and preferences of these players.

For these women their favourite games were: *Mario Kart, International Super Star Soccer, Zelda, SuperMario, Final Fantasy 7 (2), Conkers Bad Fur Day, Tony Hawke 3, Grand Theft Auto 3 (GTA3) and Tetris*. These are in order: a racing game, a soccer game, a role playing/adventure game, a platform game, a role playing/adventure game, a platform game, a sports game, a racing/action game and a puzzle game[10]. These do not fall into an easy categorisation according to 'traditional' or 'feminine' tastes given the inclusion of sports, racing and *GTA 3*. Indeed, for some interviewees they noted that their taste was changing over time and as they entered their twenties, and as the quality of games improved, they had become more interested in other genres of games. At least two of the women enjoyed playing *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* which has been hotly debated in the press for its violence (in parts to women). The game is a combination of a racing/crime/shooting game set in the 1980s in a sunny American city called Vice City. This game would appear to confound any attempt to categorise female preferences as 'traditional' [6] or consistent.

When one went beyond the crude genre categories of games to explore what kinds of pleasures these females got from playing these games some interesting points emerged. Half of the girls liked an element of flexibility or freedom in games in terms of being able to explore the world in any order they liked and in relation to controlling the main character or creating their own character. This confirms an earlier finding by Schott and Horrell [14]. The ability to change character and create one's own characters in console games indicates that playing with identities is not only part of online game play. Storyline was rated highly by these interviewees as well as puzzles, changing tempo, humour and multiplayer mode (but not online capability). While all these interviewees had a favourite all time game they were quick to point out that they chose which game to play depending on their mood and the context – sometimes they would play a quick and immediate short game, what they called a 'take it or leave it' game. When they had the time and were on their own they would choose a long, story driven single player game and when they had friends over or ended up playing games at a party it would be a competitive multiplayer game. They disliked complicated functionality/controls, unrelenting tempo and steep learning curves, although as their own skill level improved they were not adverse to trying out more challenging games.

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[10] A platform game is one where the player takes a character from the bottom of the screen up a series of ledges or platforms to the top whilst at the same time avoiding numerous obstacles placed in the way.

Within this sample of players two categories of female gamer - based on playing patterns rather then taste in games - emerged: occasional and committed. The occasional gamers spent little money on games, did not own a console or games, played less than two hours a week and played a limited number of favourite games. The committed gamer saved up to buy new consoles and games or obtained games through competitions and work connections (cost was still an issue for them), played for two hours or more per day and tended to play a wide range of games. They also went beyond their local social network and used the Internet to find advice and information. At the same time they rarely posted to bulletin boards or online discussions. For both occasional and committed females playing games was a domestic leisure activity they did both on their own and with brothers, sisters, boyfriends or male friends. Indeed these interviewees tended to prefer playing with someone else if that option was available.

Gender/technology relationship

As noted above, most of these interviewees were technically proficient and advanced users of ICTs, although not programmers. Some had struggled in secondary school to study more technical subjects (higher level physics and mathematics) and some admitted to being tomboys as children. While they felt they had grown out of their tomboy phase they were certainly aware that they were did not necessarily conform to standard essentialist feminine stereotypes in terms of their leisure activities and employment.

For interviewees the fact that men dominated their games culture was not a problem, indeed for half of them their workplaces were also dominated by men. What was an issue for them was the blatant design and marketing of games for men or the crude attempts to 'add-in' female characters into games designed around the main character being a male. While boys/men might be repulsed by games, which were clearly marketed and designed for girls/women, it appears that interviewees expressed varying levels of annoyance at the presumption in much game advertising and game design that the player is male.

In the course of the interview interviewees were asked if they felt playing digital games was seen as a boy's pastime? Not all believed that it was, but they did feel that many non-players viewed it as a boy's pastime, that many games were designed for boys/men and that the advertising for these games, especially in magazines, specifically targeted men. Given that one of the girls worked in a games localisation company and two of them wrote game reviews part-time for irish-player.com they were exposed to a wide range of games they would not have played otherwise. As a result they were all were able to give examples of games which they would not buy and were clearly designed for men and/or portrayed women in a very sexist manner. For example the game reviewers were highly critical of new releases like *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach VolleyBall* or *BMX XXX* which were promoted respectively for their realistic depictions of female breast movement and the stripping and lap dancing one gets to see as a reward for performing tricks on a bicycle. Even games many of these females enjoyed playing, like *Tomb Raider*, were criticised for the way they were packaged, marketed and the little titillating rewards offered on completion. In short, they felt that many games were designed with very masculine themes and tastes. While two of the girls did enjoy playing football games and most were tolerant of a degree of violence, they seemed most disturbed by condescending representations of women and blatant rewards which were clearly designed to fulfill particular heterosexual male fantasies.

At the same time there were games that allowed them the flexibility to explore worlds they were interested in and play, or create, multiple femininities and masculinities

in a game. For one interviewee this meant creating a 'posh me, an independent me and a superhero me!' For some females it was important to have the ability to choose a female character in a fighting game, especially if they were competing against a male friend. For others it was more important to pick the character according to their skill set, regardless of their sex or the sex of the person they were competing against in the real world. It was clear that when their virtual character could not be changed the players tried to ignore their representation, something which interviewees elsewhere have called 'bracketing' [15]. Indeed, they noted that the design of the male game characters were equally as outrageous as the females in games, pointing to some awareness of the gender essentialisms built into many games. Once they were playing the game the gameplay became more important than the character design, a fact which Newman highlights [10].

Conclusions.

While some attention is being given by the game development industry to including female game players into the games culture it would appear that much more has to be done at the level of the games and the advertising of the games before progress can be made. The console advertising strategies adopted by certain key players manufacturers are clearly insufficient. One of the problems is that these occasional branding campaigns, which are largely gender neutral, must be seen in the context of the many advertisements and games which are designed and marketed with a masculine and heterosexual male player in mind[11]. Perhaps one of the problems with these strategies is that the market research underpinning them is based on existing registered users and is not capturing the range of people who play digital games, especially females. Clearly there is a dearth of information on the number of females who play digital games, their attitudes and preferences. This invisibility means that gender is not adequately problematised by the industry and is only thought of in aspirational terms.

From an industry perspective it is clear that the design and price of a console and the range of games available on it can act to deter or attract consumers. There is nothing new in that advice. But it is clear that there is no single type of game preferred by these female interviewees – they were eclectic in their tastes and in their playing habits and clearly it would be very difficult to design a game which would cater for all of them, and they would not want it. When asked what kind of game they would design if they could, interviewees always referred back to games they had already played which indicates that they enjoy aspects of existing games. At the same time they wanted acknowledgement that female players existed and flexibility in games so they were afforded more autonomy.

Finally, despite the considerable sums of money spent on console advertising it would seem from these interviewees that if these females did not have access to a social network of people who gamed, in these cases a network which was offline, they would not have become digital games players. The age at which one is exposed to digital games may play an important role in the recruitment process given that all interviewees were recruited between the ages of six and twelve. Interestingly the dominance of males in these networks does not appear to have been an issue for the interviewees, these males were seen as supportive and an important source of 'expert' knowledge. So for these interviewees their games culture was private and domestic and

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[11] Indeed consoles are sold as loss leaders and most of the profits gained by console manufacturers are obtained through game sales.

they selectively filtered out situations, content and media which made they feel uncomfortable or unwanted. From an outside perspective they were largely invisible.

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Table 1 Overview of Player Interviewees.

	Int.1	Int. 2	Int. 3	Int. 4	Int. 5	Int. 6	Int. 7	Int. 8	Int. 9	Int. 10
Age	19	24	22	22	18	25	30	19	19	28
Nation.	Irish	Irish	Irish	Irish	Irish	English	Irish	Irish	Irish	Irish
Occup.	Student	Software localisation / Game Tester	Student	Student	Student	Unemployed	Web content manager	Shop assis. in games shop	Student	Works in software comp.
Domestic arrang.	Lives with Mum[1]	With boyfriend	With boyfriend	Shares with 3 friends	Lives with Mum	Lives at home	Lives with boyfriend	Lives at home	Lives at home	Lives with boy-friend
Location	Dublin South	Dublin City Centre	Dublin City Centre	Dublin West	Dublin South	London	Dublin South	Dublin, North	North County Dublin	Dublin North
Age first played		7/8	9	9/10	6/7	8	12/13	10	10	10