

# From damsel in distress to Peach Bomber



The stereotypical image of a gamer is a smelly, basement-dwelling teen boy. In reality, adult women make up 33% of gamers, with boys under 18 only representing 18% of the population (Entertainment Software Association, 2009a, ¶ 3). Yet a survey from 2002 found

that only 16% of characters in best-selling video games are female (Entertainment Software Association, 2009a, ¶ 3). Game box art also mostly shows men, usually in dominant poses, while the few women who grace video game covers are frequently in submissive poses (Chaika, 2004, ¶ 8). So what is the relationship between girls and video games? Are there any games out there designed with girls in mind? And should we be encouraging girls to play more games?

## Do girls play games?

The figure most widely cited online is that 40% of people who play electronic games are women, though this doesn't tell us what percentage of women are gamers (ESA, 2009b, ¶ 6). Studies seem to indicate that women are more likely to play games online ("64% of the North American online video gamers are women" (Women and videogames, 2006, p. 5)) on their computers than consoles ("70% of players of games written for consoles are male" (Media Awareness Network, 2009, ¶ 1)). So the answer really depends on who you ask, and how you ask. Is this a survey of North Americans only? Are you considered a gamer if you play *Solitaire* on your computer at work, or only if you own a \$500 console and over 10 games? More comprehensive, well-defined surveys will need to be conducted before we have an accurate picture of how many girls play video games.

At a casual glance, it can be difficult to pin down the percentage of females who play a game like *World of Warcraft*, an **MMORPG**. Characters that appear female on screen may be played by a man behind the screen, and female players may choose to use a male character – for fun, or to reduce incidents of harassment or discrimination. For games that employ voice chat, such as the *Halo* trilogy, there is even a device on the market designed to give a female player a masculine-sounding voice, to avoid being treated like a girl by other players.

Hopefully, girls won't feel that they have to use those devices for long, as everyone seems to be in agreement that the number of girl gamers is growing. Because female gamer participation has lagged behind male participation, women represent a huge growth market for the industry, which generated over \$10 billion in software sales in 2004 (Reimer, 2006, ¶ 2). The mostly-untapped female population has been referred to as a "pot of gold" (Lee, 2008, ¶ 5), and for good reason: women over 35 are actually the most likely segment of the population to pay for casual games (Caulfield, 2008, ¶ 3).

## What games do girls play?

Some girls play all games – from *Grand Theft Auto* (the second most popular game played by girls, according to research conducted for the book *Grand Theft Childhood*) to *The Sims* (the most popular according to *Grand Theft Childhood* (p. 92)) to *Team Fortress 2*. Overall,

## girl gamers and girls in games

their tastes are as varied as male gamers – the results are all over the map. One journalist spoke with a group of young girls who play **first-person-shooter** game *Counterstrike* in a local league (Wells, 2006, ¶ 21).

Generally speaking, there are a number of games that are currently popular among girls. In published interviews with teen gamers, girls state that they love *Super Smash Bros.*, a fighting game made by Nintendo that includes their most popular characters from over the years, such as Pikachu, Princess Zelda, Samus, Mario, and Yoshi.

Simulation games are a popular genre, from the classic PC game *The Sims* and its **expansion packs** to farm simulator *Harvest Moon*. But girls also enjoy **music and rhythm games** such as *Rock Band*, *Sing Star*, and *Dance Dance Revolution*.

A quick browse of game cataloguing site raptr.com shows that many female users like PC games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *Maplestory*, *Call of Duty 4*, *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six*, *Command and Conquer 3*, *Sim City 4*, and *Poker Stars*.

Another very popular **platform** for girls is the **Nintendo DS**. This is a handheld system that plays DS games as well as Game Boy Advance games (Nintendo's previous handheld system). It uses a touch screen which is useful for many puzzle and strategy games. A browse of raptr.com shows that DS games popular with girls include *Brain Age*, *Animal Crossing*, *Mario Kart*, *Mario Party*, and *Nintendogs*.

Many articles about girl gamers say that girls want peaceful games with happy endings, but a survey of almost 60 girls (average and median age: 13) found that the top five desired traits in a computer game were competition, discovery, intellectual problem solving, learning, and creation. Beauty, love, and altruism ranked at the bottom of the list (Hubbard, Savoie, Rushton & Rushton, 2007, p. 8).

So what do girls play? In a word, everything! While annually-released **sports games** that reflect current pro sports teams and players such as *Madden '96* or *NHL 2K9* were not mentioned in any articles I came across, every other genre I could think of was mentioned by girls writing about games or girls being interviewed about games. Pet **simulators** like *Nintendogs*, action games like the *Legend of Zelda* series, shooters such as *Counterstrike*, **RPGs** like *Final Fantasy* and *World of Warcraft*, racing games and even violent games such as *Grand Theft Auto* were discussed by female gamers.

## Are girl gamers taken seriously?

Unfortunately, for the time being, the answer to this question appears to be no, at every level of the industry – from the people directing the companies to those designing and programming the games, to many of the men who play them.

In 2008, the Wireless Director at THQ was quoted as saying "To put it bluntly, girls have got better things to do...I don't think there's ever been a successful game really pinpointed just for



girls” (THQ: ‘Girls have better things to do than play games’, 2008, ¶ 3). Programmers and designers have admitted to being reluctant to work on anything that seems girl-centric (Hubbard, Savoie, Rushton & Rushton, 2007, p. 16).

Searching for information on girl gamers online brings up many serious, thoughtful articles – but it brings up just as many questions from young girls and guys, posted to services such as Yahoo Answers, along the lines of “Do only ugly girls play video games?” and “Does playing video games make a girl more sexy?” An excellent article by Didi Cardoso details a number of demeaning incidents she has experienced while gaming, including requests for cybersex (2007, ¶ 12).

Many games are designed with minimal or no female characters, or with female characters that were clearly designed to please heterosexual males (such as the girls in the *Dead or Alive* series, famous for their very large breasts). Even female characters in games are often portrayed negatively. Research from as early as 1991 showed that “females are often either victims or prizes in video games” (Agosto, 2004, ¶ 10).

An article in *Gamasutra* tracked 15,000 games and found that, of games which do not allow you to choose between playing a male or female character, most games overwhelmingly offer only a male protagonist (Divinch, 2008, ¶ 6). 73% of shooter games offer only male protagonists, and 64% of sports games and 51% of action games as well. The only genres where only female protagonists were more common (at 14%) were social and economic simulation games.

At the same time, the few games developed with a female audience in mind are incredibly stereotypical in nature. The *Imagine* series on the Nintendo DS has a game called *Babyz*, where the goal is to raise a baby throughout its development. The *Imagine* games, including titles such as *Babysitters*, have sold over 8 million copies (Kalning, 2009, ¶ 3). While it’s good that female-dominated areas such as babysitting and teaching are finally the subject of video games, behaviours and activities such as child-rearing and shopping are already frequently explored in other forms of entertainment, such as dolls and movies.

The online reaction to these games has not been kind, inspiring comments such as the following: “I would love to know what else Ubisoft is doing for girls, other than shopping, fashion and pets. Anything? It’s a bit ironic that the series is called *Imagine*, and yet Ubisoft is demonstrating a distinct lack of the stuff here... ‘what’s next, *Imagine: The Glass Ceiling?*” (The Brainy Gamer, 2007, ¶ 8)

The *Imagine* line of games does branch out beyond babysitting, mothering, and teaching, with games such as *Animal Doctor*, *Rock Star*, *Fashion Designer*, *Wedding Designer*, *Interior Designer*, and *Master Chef*. Personally, I would love to see *Imagine: Game Designer!*

Interestingly, this entire line of games does not seem to be taken seriously by the gaming industry. Most of the *Imagine* games have been out since 2007 or 2008, and yet they have not received enough reviews in the press to be given an aggregate score by Metacritic.com, which averages reviews of media such as games, movies, and music.

For example, *Imagine: Babyz* could not receive a Metacritic

score because it had only received one critical review, a score of 3.5/10 (which is extremely low and rare in the video game world) from IGN.com, a popular gaming site. The IGN review states that the score is so low because the game was poorly designed, with many technical flaws: “It’s the touch screen control that’s the trouble” (Thomas, 2007, ¶ 2) This suggests that the very people making the game did not even take it seriously.

On the cover of the game is a logo for Ubisoft, a well-known and successful video game publisher and developer. While they only publish the *Imagine* games and did not develop them, they clearly stand behind this product, and develop/publish popular, highly-reviewed male-oriented games such as *Assassin’s Creed* (Score of 80 on Metacritic), *Far Cry 2* (85), *Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six* (93), and *Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell* (89).

Clearly, there is a different market and different expectation for a game series such as the *Tom Clancy* games as compared to the *Imagine* games. The publishers and developers invested significantly more money into the former. Similar investment isn’t being made into games primarily designed for girls.

Other *Imagine* games reviewed on IGN.com received scores of 6.5 (*Animal Doctor*), 4.6 (*Ballet Star*), 3.0 (*Fashion Designer*). The lowest-rated game was *Wedding Designer* (2.5) and the highest was *Teacher* with 7.5, quite a high score.

Approximately 25 games have been published so far in the *Imagine* line since 2007, which is a huge amount of games, and also suggests that pumping out a number of similar games is more important than quality. They’ve taken a shotgun approach to the girl gamer market, and it seems that they feel that girl gamers care less about the technical aspects of the games.

## Conclusions

So, girls do game – making up both a significant proportion of game players and of the potential market for future expansion – and girls are willing to pay for games. But so far, by and large, girl gamers and potential girl gamers have not been taken seriously.

Video games are a powerful medium, with the potential for controlling the storyline, affecting the outcome of the game, designing your own levels, and solving puzzles being present in almost any game. Imaginative, exciting games for girls should be purchased and promoted. But first they need to be developed.

## Do girls make games?

According to the International Game Developers Association, only 11.5% of game designers are women (Lee, 2008, ¶ 15, p. 2). The lack of games created with girls in mind (or at least considered) may be partially because there are fewer women than men in the industry. If they keep producing low quality and low quantity games for girls, this cycle could very well continue, despite the interest and aptitude women have for games. When you come across a game that girls love, support it and promote it to other groups who are involved with teens. Girl gamers, no matter what games they choose to play, should be taken seriously by the industry, and we can help.





## Why encourage girls to play games?

Today's video games can include physical activity; hand-eye coordination; technical skills; social interaction; provide visual and auditory stimulation; tell a complex story; require strategic thinking and risk analysis; encourage design skills; inspire fan fiction, fan art, websites, costumes; teach pattern recognition; problem-solving; encourage goal-seeking; reward thoroughness and completion; and show reactions and consequences to choices.

With the online capabilities of today's gaming machines – computers, consoles, and hand-held devices – gaming presents a new and different way of socializing and building connections worldwide.

Video games tend to build spatial awareness, presenting situations where players have to gauge speed, depth, height, and other physical relationships.

Video games also help to build computer literacy and familiarity with systems. How often are you at a presentation or a meeting where technical difficulties are encountered? The more people who grow up understanding how to hook up audio and visual components of a technical system, the fewer delays and embarrassments there will be at these events. It's empowering to be able to set up your own computer system – or even build your own computer – and help others when they encounter difficulties. If we encourage girls to pick up the controller or take the mouse, their interest may extend beyond the game to the very system itself, encouraging further studies in computer programming, computer science, electrical engineering, and other stereotypically male pursuits.

There are many wonderful resources that explore the positive effect of video games. Check out the resources and collection ideas section for some excellent articles and books on the subject.

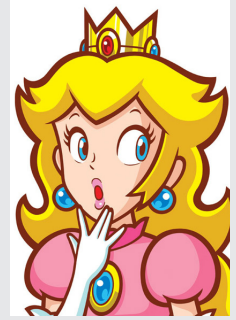
### Suggestions for a girl-gamer friendly library

If you have a teen advisory group or consult a group of teens about gaming-related programming or resources, make sure you have female representation! There are lots of girl gamers out there, so track them down and encourage them to join your groups. Furthermore,

- Make sure girl gamers are not excluded from your gaming collection or events. Stock a mix of “pink box” girl games (the *Imagine* series and similar titles) for those who truly are interested in horses and figure skating, as well as some stronger, more creative, or gender neutral titles such as *LittleBigPlanet* for the PlayStation 3.
- Don't discourage girls from playing any game. If she is interested in *Halo* or *Metal Gear* then let her play and participate.
- Don't assume that girls want to play as the female character – maybe she prefers to race in *Mario Kart* as Bowser.
- Have consistent standards for your boy and girl gamers. Would you react differently to a 14-year-old boy asking to play or bring in an M-rated game than you would a girl?
- Encourage lots of interaction and support between girl and boy gamers. Consider giving bonus points in tournaments to players with co-ed teams.
- Purchase and promote games that don't push stereotypes of men or women.

Over the years there have been some influential female video game character. Here are some to be familiar with:

### *Princess Peach* (formerly known as *Princess Toadstool*)



“Thank you Mario, but our princess is in another castle!” Princess Peach was the elusive ‘goal’ of *Super Mario Bros.*, the game that came bundled with the Nintendo Entertainment System in the mid-1980s. She was only seen at the end of the game, once protagonist Mario (or Luigi) had stormed through eight different worlds trying to rescue her. She was a playable character in *Super Mario Bros. 2*, and a popular choice among male and female gamers both due to her special jumping abilities. Even in the most recent release in the main Mario franchise, *Super Mario Galaxy*, Peach must be rescued. Fortunately, her role in spinoff series’ such as *Mario Kart* and *Super Smash Bros.* is expanded, making her a good strategic choice for gamers. In terms of appearance, Peach has long blonde hair, big blue eyes, and a pink dress – definitely a focus on cute!

### *Samus Aran*



Another character from the mid-80s, Samus Aran is the lone playable character in the *Metroid* series. The cool thing about her is that many gamers do not realize that she is female – her gender is only revealed once she takes her body armour off at the end of the first game. She is truly a positive video game figure to introduce to girls. The *Metroid* games are a mix of **platformer** action, shoot-em-up, and puzzle solving. Many levels are mazes, and hidden items are everywhere. The combination of shooting, wall-jumping, and exploring makes for a game playable and enjoyable by

those with different interests in games. Like Princess Peach, her character has persisted for over 20 years, most recently appearing in *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption* for the Wii, and as a character in *Super Smash Bros.*



### Faith

*Mirror's Edge* is a first-person action game that includes many elements of parkour. You are living in a totalitarian future where communication is heavily monitored; as such, runners deliver messages by traveling via unconventional routes and delivering messages. Faith's sister has been framed for a murder, and you spend the game gaining access to secure areas and following leads to find out who is behind the murder. For an interesting read on the changes to Faith's appearance – which was initially small-chested due to the physical demands on her character – check out <http://www.joystiq.com/2008/11/26/mirrors-edge-dev-bummed-over-curved-faith/>



### Chell

*Portal* became 2007's game of the year according to sites like AVclub.com and Joystiq.com, winning many other awards. Like *Metroid*, the protagonist's gender is not made obvious in normal game play, and the only way you really know you're playing a woman is if you see yourself through the portals you've created. The game itself is quite subversive and innovative, taking many conventions of video games and upending them. The voice that claims to guide you through the puzzles you encounter turns out to be corrupt, and Chell must deliberately disobey orders in order to emerge alive.



### The female form



Are these women included for sex appeal or for girl gamers to relate to? Working on the assumption that the vast majority of game players are heterosexual males (an assumption that many surveys are starting to prove incorrect), some developers make a point of embellishing some aspects of the female form, and zooming in to show off their hard work on breast physics.

Above is famous game and movie heroine Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series, which remains popular today.

Left are two girls from the *Dead or Alive* series, in which a volleyball game was released due to fan support of its large-chested female characters.