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Ethos, Gender, and Gaming

When it comes to digital gamers, most people think of men and if “real gamers” are mentioned most people almost exclusively think of men. Although most people think only men play video games, there are plenty of women who are gamers in the world. Female gamers are thought of as just trying to be cool, “fake” gamers, not serious, and many other stereotypes. The message is clear: men can play video games and women cannot, but if women do play video games they will not be taken seriously and will be made fun of and ridiculed. The words and actions of men are taken seriously because they have creditability in gaming while women do not have that creditability.

Creditability in the study of rhetoric is called ethos which is defined by *Silva Rhetoricae* as “the persuasive appeal of one's character, especially how this character is established by means of the speech or discourse.” *Silva Rhetoricae* also mentions “Aristotle claimed that one needs to appear both knowledgeable about one's subject and benevolent” in order to have ethos (“Ethos”). This definition holds true in both digital and non-digital spaces, although the balance of who has ethos changes between digital and non-digital games.

Female gamers are perceived to be ignorant and males are perceived to be both, as Aristotle claimed, benevolent and knowledgeable about video games. Interestingly this inequality in the balance of ethos only exists in digital gaming and not in analogue, or non-digital, games. In non-digital games, everyone regardless of gender has the same amount of

ethos. The biggest question I hope to answer is why there is a huge discrepancy between women and men when it comes to video games, that does not exist in non-digital games. In order to answer this question, I will be looking at aspects of live action role play (larp) as well as aspects of the gaming industry including board games and video games.

We will start with looking at board and card games. The first American board game was made by a woman which seems to give more ethos to women than to men but that game, *The Mansion of Happiness*, was aimed at all genders. This game was the first of many during the 19th and early 20th centuries and in this time many women were involved in game development alongside men, which provided equal ethos in game development. When the Parker Brothers entered the gaming industry, they made a wide variety of games that had as many themes and appealed to many different audiences.

Their game boxes and advertisements featured a family playing the game which gave ethos to all genders and all ages. All of their board games, card games, and puzzles were tested by the “Pastime Girls” who played the games with George Parker and gave suggestions on what worked, what didn’t work, how to improve the games, and determined if a game was fun (Fron et al. *Hegemony* 6-7). These women got their nickname from Parker’s Pastime Puzzles, where their ability to follow their impulses in an artistic way helped them to cut a variety of puzzle patterns from scratch each day. Some women were also hired to hand paint and assemble the puzzles which gave women a lot of ethos in this specific area of gaming, but the overall ethos in gaming was still equal among all genders.

Later, with the rise of computers, came video games. The majority of the computer industry was, and still is, composed of white men who developed programs, or in this case games for other white men to play. As these games became more successful in that demographic, “...

with a few exceptions, it [the game industry] has become more risk-averse, and more oriented to what it defines as its ‘core market’” (Fron et al. *Hegemony* 7). This market is often called “hardcore gamers” and is envisioned as aggressive teens to young adult males embracing graphical violence, male power and domination fantasies, hypersexualized objectified women, and racial stereotyping and discrimination.

Some workers in the industry have attempted to break out of the cycle of making games for the core market. One executive of a major game company encountered such an attempt: “In response to the recommendation from his marketing director that he speak to her about creating games for girls, he quipped: ‘Our job is to take lunch money away from 14-year-old boys.’” (Fron et al. *Hegemony* 7). Some of these 14-year-old boys were even playtesting the company’s games for free. Both the executive’s quip and the fact that boys were the playtesters helps more firmly establish male ethos over female ethos. Not all males in the gaming industry like that it often is a for men by men industry, an anonymous survey taker made note of the lack of diversity in the gaming industry: “I’m all for a diverse industry, it just isn’t there.” (Fron et al. *Hegemony* 3).

There are some games that were targeted towards girls and women, like Nintendo’s *Super Princess Peach*. Most of these games have met with only partial success which leads companies in the gaming industry to believe that women are not interested in games. There are some video games that do well with all audiences and most of them are indie games. Indie games often are not created with the financial support of a publisher and are smaller games that are less afraid to take risks than the rest of the video game industry. These games are often not marketed and remain relatively unknown to most gamers so, although they provide ethos to men and women more equally than other games, there is only so much they can do to level the ethos of men and

women in video games. With *Super Princess Peach*, the main character is Peach, however her main way of fighting is with mood swings and one of the main goals is to recover her “vibe scepter”. Japanese theology explains that these “mood swings” are caused by a god or goddess, in Peach’s case goddess, not being given enough praise to keep them in a calm, happy mood or “vibe”. To gamers not familiar with Japanese theology, it seems she fights with PMS and needs her vibrator back. This game tried and failed to appeal to many women because of its seemingly sexist tones. These types of games further undermine feminine ethos in gaming and prove that “...as “gamers,” women still inhabit a “masculine universe...” (Fron et al. *Hegemony* 7).

Box art and advertisements for many video games feature characters and backgrounds from the game instead of showing people playing the game. Most of the characters are males or overly sexualized and objectified females that appear in the game. When female characters are on the box art or in advertisements, they are often scantily clad, put off to one side, and are not in the foreground, but rather in the middle- or background. This can be seen in many advertisements and video game boxes but also in Fron et al’s *Hegemony of Play*. These depictions of women further lower the ethos of women by presenting them as things or side characters rather than as people who have depth and importance.

There are also literary models for re-rendering game spaces, such as Lucy in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. These books feature a female protagonist having adventures much like other video game protagonists have, provide women with empowering role models, and as a result provide positive ethos equal to their male counterparts in the genre and their own stories (Fullerton). On the other hand, the image results for the search terms “gamer girl” versus “gamer”/ “gamer boy” and other search equivalents provide more negative ethos for women. The images for “gamer” or “gamer boy” or similar

terms shows men and boys having fun playing video games or getting mad at their games.

“Gamer girl” and other similar terms mostly results in images of girls and women posing sexily with game controllers for the camera with varying amounts of clothing. This reinforces the stereotype that women are not “real gamers” and should not be taken seriously while men should be taken seriously.

Live action role play (larp) games started after video games were on the markets and began in the late 1970s. These games are the grownup versions of children’s play-pretend games where there is “...a litany of exciting roles that boys may play, from policeman, to cowboy, to aviator, to jockey, girls are relegated to the roleplay of motherhood afforded by dolls” (Fron et al. *Playing 2*). These stereotypical roles which provided boys with more ethos than girls have been phasing out of children’s games. There are also some gender issues in larps and some games solve this “gender trouble” by using one of two strategies. These strategies are “by pre-assigning character gender and sexuality based on casting questionnaires and player preference, or by allowing players to choose the genders of their characters and create the subsequent intimate relationships at their own comfort levels” (Brown). The second strategy does not remove gender from larps, but instead allows players, regardless of their own gender, to assign their character’s gender.

This strategy is used in the popular larp *College of Wizardry* inspired by the *Harry Potter* series. In *College of Wizardry* “Characters are written with a surname and a first initial, and descriptions are written in the second person to address the participant.” This allows people of all genders equal ethos because “After the character is cast, the player adds gender-specific elements as they flesh out the concept presented to them” (Brown). These elements allow men and

women, as well as those of other genders, to create a game and game environment that sees and provides for their wants and needs for a game.

In larps, board games, and other analogue games, both men and women have equal ethos. This is because men and women work equally to produce games that will appeal to the largest audience possible regardless of gender. However, in video games this is not the case “Since those who are perceived to have good ethos are generally those whose knowledge ‘counts’ in our world” (Schmertz 2). For video games, this most often means men because most coders and other people involved in the video game industry are men who make a majority of their games for one particular audience: other men.

Most of my sources are at least ten years old and the most recent one is two years old. Even though some things have changed, all my sources are still relevant to how the video game industry is today. That being the case, I am curious as to how rhetoric could be used to improve the gaming industry. It is possible that with the right mix of rhetorical appeals the imbalance of who has ethos in gaming could be rebalanced so that men, women, and even people of other genders have equal ethos in both digital and non-digital games.

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