

Games for Girls?

A Glance Inside the Gendered Language and Symbols of Videogame Marketing

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Splitting commodities into separate products based on gender is a prevalent tactic used in marketing. It is commonly seen in toys, personal hygiene products, and even advertisements of different foods. By targeting separate audiences, or even excluding groups, companies may focus on creating advertisements that will resonate with the majority's desires, which in turn equals more profit. Videogames are a special topic in advertising. Unlike other toys and products, there is oftentimes no equal or clear division between what designates "boy" games and "girl" games. There are a few games that strongly target young girls, while the rest of games are assumed to be for a male audience. As an example of gendered marketing in this area, I decide to pay particular attention to one company, videogame developer and publisher Ubisoft. Ubisoft's *Imagine* sub-company creates a small, highly feminine, genre of games aimed at young girls. The *Imagine* series allows you to play as babysitters and fashionistas, whereas Ubisoft's other games may allow the player to be assassins and heroes. Fitness titles and dance games are also slightly geared more towards a feminine audience, though men may also be shown playing. Therefore, what I wish to uncover from this study are the answers to two questions: "How do differences in lexical usage of videogame descriptions attempt to target a gendered audience?" and "What are some of the signifiers used in advertising to denote masculine and feminine game types?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a long-held idea that men are practical and women are emotional. Mary Talbot specifies a set of

binary oppositions between men and women, with the words used to describe women supporting a traditional idealization of women with nurturing qualities of "motherhood" (475–476). Toys, depending on the targeted gender, follow a typical set of rules in both color and nature. For appearance, boys' toys have been found to be neutral or boldly colored (red, black, brown, and gray), while girls' toys are traditionally pastel or a mix of pinks and purples (Auster and Mansbach 381–382). Color tactics such as these may help reinforce what is already taught to children – pink and princesses are for girls and not for boys. Oftentimes, however, toys originally created for boys may be released in new feminized versions in "pinks" to make them attractive and marketable to girls as well.

Toys meant for a specific gender follow stereotypical ideas of expected gendered behavior. It is not surprising, then, that Judith E. Owen Blakemore and Renee E. Centers find that toys meant for girls are rated as more nurturing and tend to "focus on the development of domestic skills" (631). They focus on physical attractiveness, a caring nature, and domestic skills such as cooking. For boys, toys rather have a violent or dangerous tone, and competitiveness is emphasized (Blakemore and Centers 631). Stemming from this, feminine trait words involve creativity and an emotional/nurturing connotation, while masculine trait words show power and leadership.

Some argue that stereotypes portrayed in the media could be detrimental to society. A study by Sue Lafky and Margaret Duffy confirmed that even brief exposure to stereotyped advertisements plays a part in reinforcing stereotypes about traditional

gender roles. Study participants first viewed either ten slides of women in stereotypical advertisements or ten slides of women in non-stereotypical advertisements and were then shown a neutral slide. The participants who had been shown stereotypical advertisements were more likely to agree with the stereotypical statements on the questionnaire (on a five-point scale) about the woman shown in the neutral slide (383–385). This study could show how learning gendered behavior and then consistently seeing it reinforced through media and social life aids in seeing the world through gendered lenses.

Talbot stresses the point that stereotypes are produced and reproduced in various art forms – from television shows to literature. It therefore makes sense that this may also be the case within videogames. Throughout all of this constant reproduction, an ideology may be remade and reinforced, oftentimes to benefit the hegemonic power, or the groups which may be favored within a society. “Stereotypes tend to be directed at subordinate groups” and may include both “good” and “bad” stereotypes (Talbot 471). When subordinate or minority groups are portrayed, they are often done so in a stereotypical light, which reinforces surrounding ideas. One study sought to discover more about the relationship between sexualized female characters and videogame sales. The study found that both sexualizing and marginalizing women positively affected sales (Near 12). Indeed, as Anita Sarkeesian discusses in one of her videos, when female characters appear in videogames, they are often presented in sensualized ways (00:03:55–00:05:12). We can make the assumption here that this is because the videogame industry, dominated by males, is marketing most games towards a male audience, where companies seem to be following the motto of ‘sex sells’.

METHOD

To find out more about gender and videogame ad-

vertisements, I focus on the differences in lexical items. The design of game covers, such as color, font, and imagery are also taken into account. On all games I specifically examine: lexical choices, color scheme, font, and the main picture/image. To narrow my options, I focus on a single company: Ubisoft. I chose Ubisoft because they produce various games, ranging from the masculine end to the feminine end of the gender spectrum. Because this study is done on a small selection of one company’s games, the findings are not applicable to all games. The US GameStop website is the main source to find examples of Ubisoft titles for examination. These titles include, towards the masculine end, *Far Cry 5*, and towards the feminine end, *Imagine: Fashion Life*. I consider the pictures on the covers, the language used in the description, as well as pictures utilized as a sort of advertising in the “gallery” section. Where the game descriptions are quoted, lexical items of importance are italicized. Other important areas that are taken into consideration, as a part of intersectionality, are the uses of race and age. Although targeted gender in regard to lexical usage is the main focus of this paper, race and age also play an important role in deciding for whom these games are created.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

IMAGERY AND SYMBOLS

Humans tend to be very visual, and the market knows this; it adapts and creates images that will quickly grab the attention of the consumer. *Far Cry 5* shows a cover with eight men, one woman, and a wolf/dog. One man sits at a table, arms spread wide in a display of power. He wears a suit and appears to be the most well-dressed. Another man stabs a slab of meat on the table, while someone else sits on the ground, with his head down and scars across his back forming the word “SINNER”. Weapons strew the scene, and three different American flags can be spotted. All characters appear white – even the wolf/dog. The woman is wearing a dress and flowers on

Lexical usage in the feminine game supports stereotypes of women as passive and pretty

her head; she also holds a flower. One leg is propped suggestively up on the table. From the edge of the cover, a pair of hands reach out – one to the flower and one on the woman’s shoulder. The open background and rolling hills seem to invite the player into a world of open-exploration. Violence, power, and control are clearly themes taken from the cover of this game. While the men don guns and weapons, the one woman wields a flower. She even appears delicate as the flower, while the men are shown as powerful and in control. They are perhaps a means of protection, as the man on the ground is bound and defeated. In the gameplay images available, only men are shown in combat.

For *Just Dance 2018*, the pink, purple, and blue cover seems to advertise to a more feminine audience. The cover shows four women dancing or jumping; the fifth person, who appears to be a man, is wearing a panda head. A large crowd cheers them on. This coincides with the game advertising to a more diverse (and larger) audience. No extra images are offered for this game; however, there is a video offered in its stead. Offering a video to watch, rather than displaying a series of still images, could be due to the “action” this game demands from the player.

Ubisoft’s *Imagine: Fashion Life* displays three white teenage girls on the main cover. The only thing “diverse” about them is their clothing, and

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perhaps their hairstyle. They are all shown smiling in the image and looking directly at the viewer. The girl in the very back lifts a purse and holds a cell phone up to her ear. Focusing on the clothing and accessories in these images, the player can assume that this game will heavily focus on aspects of appearance – a feminine domain. Another stereotype can be seen mirrored here in the image of the cell phone. This could be interpreted as the portrayal of woman as the “empty-headed chatterer” (Talbot 469). To advertise to a young, female audience, this game plays up these

images of femininity in western culture.

LANGUAGE AND LEXICAL ITEMS

For *Just Dance 2018*, the title is displayed in white capital letters. The bold font covers a large area on the case, immediately drawing attention to its name. For this game, language remains the most neutral, attempting to advertise to the most diverse crowd.

Whether you’re a party starter, a dancer in the making, or a seasoned pro, get ready to turn up the volume and unleash your inner dancer with Just Dance® 2018!

Great for *family* gatherings, parties, and holidays, Just Dance 2018 brings *family* and *friends* together like no other game. (*Just Dance 2018*)

The language attempts to connect with the largest number of people – beginners to experts; young to old; women to men. “Family” is mentioned twice within one sentence, emphasizing the importance of this game as a group activity.

The title of *Far Cry 5* is a large bold white font as well. The letters are thick with sharp edges. The capital letters imply a masculinity that is powerful and in control. The font stands out and asserts itself from the front cover. Looking at the lexical usage in the game’s description, I identified masculine, power words dealing with violence and control.

[...] When your arrival incites the cult to *violently seize control* of the region, you must rise up and spark the fires of *resistance* to liberate a besieged community.

Freely explore Hope County’s rivers, lands, and skies with the largest customizable *weapon* and vehicle roster ever in a Far Cry game. You are the *hero* of the story in a thrilling world that hits back with every *punch*, and where the places you discover and the locals you ally with will shape your story in ways you’ll never see coming. (*Far Cry 5*)

The description even instructs the player that they must “rise up” and become a “hero,” again instilling this theme of power and control. Another interesting

point coincides with the imagery of an open world on the cover. As you “freely explore” and “play your way” you are also taking control and even liberating the oppressed. Most importantly, your male character is to “lead the resistance,” one photo states. It is not going to be an easy journey, as the world is sure to hit back with every “punch,” a nod to a masculinity that will need to be able to withstand this struggle.

Noticing the capital letters in the masculine videogame made me immediately realize that the feminine one rather has an excess of lower-case letters. The curly font reinforces femininity and softness. There is a star flying from one dotted “i” to another. The *Imagine: Fashion Life* game also offers an incredibly short description in comparison to the other.

Imagine® is introducing the most *realistic* and *customizable fashion design* game yet for the Nintendo 3DS system that allows you to create whatever you *dream*. In *Imagine Fashion Life*, experience three *fabulous fashion careers*: become the *trendy* designer, the most *glamorous top model* or the best mall owner! This 3D game features high-quality, realistic graphics and allows players with a love of all-things- to truly unleash their *creativity* and *management* skills. (*Imagine: Fashion Life*)

What I find interesting here is that both the words “realistic” and “dream” are used within the same sentence. It is promising to the player that this game will allow them to create whatever they *dream*, while remaining a “realistic” experience. You, as the player, are able to *experience* three different fashion careers – all involving either appearance or consumerism. This even coincides with what Talbot calls “occupational stereotypes,” designating women as shoppers (470). The adjectives used all contain feminine connotations: *fabulous*, *trendy*, and *glamorous*. The images that are shown from this game contain no words. They are pictures of your character, playing her various parts as fashionista, designer, and mall owner. Between the masculine and feminine games, a question seems to emerge: Women may be good fashion managers, but are they good leaders?

More importance seems to be put on the masculine game. Its lengthy description and edited images show more time and money has been spent in its production. This is the fifth game in the *Far Cry* series, but there appears to only be one *Imagine: Fashion Life*. The Imagine sub-company, however, goes on to offer a variety of other games and experiences, including *Imagine Teacher*, *Imagine Babyz*, *Imagine Animal Doctor*, *Imagine Master Chef*, *Imagine Rock Star*, *Imagine Figure Skater*, *Imagine Fashion Designer*, and *Petz*. Interestingly, both the masculine and feminine games offer a high level of customization and realism to attract potential buyers. However, *what* is being customized, is where gender comes into the equation. Whereas one game offers weapon and vehicle customization, the other offers an array of fashion accessories. In the masculine game, you seem to be the one in control, while in the feminine game, you merely passively “experience” your career. The longer description for the masculine game seems to denote more importance and care in the creation of it. Lexical usage in the masculine game stresses leadership, domination, and violence. Lexical usage in the feminine game supports stereotypes of women as passive and pretty. An issue may be seen within the stereotypes the feminine game reinforces; as Talbot has said, stereotypes “reduce and simplify” those to whom they refer (471).

In conclusion, lexical usage does in fact vary between masculine and feminine game types, and it tends to be utilized in a stereotypical manner. Different language and words are used to draw a particular audience into purchasing the game. When targeting a male audience, control, power, and violence are all attractive. For the female audience, a focus on appearance is important. Main signifiers targeting a gendered audience can be seen in the pictures/images presented. Pastels and pinks coincide with femininity, while more neutral or basic colors are appropriate for the masculine game. This particularly goes along with what Carol Auster and Claire Mansbach discussed regarding gender and color. Less obvious signifiers are seen in the way

the letters and font are created. Lower-case letters and soft, swirly font is on the cover of the feminine game, and the masculine game uses large, bold font and capital letters. What is also of interest is that highly feminized videogames target a younger audience, while the highly masculine range tends to be targeted to an older audience. In the videogame advertising industry, a masculine landscape dominates, because that is what translates into sales. Men and women may both find masculine or neutral games appealing, which propels them to purchase the next game in the series. Products geared towards a feminine audience have a narrow and more gender-specific buyer. To survive in the industry, it is imperative to reach the largest audience, and advertisers will use all the tools available – changing lexical usage, color, font, and description – to persuade consumers and sell their product.

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Coming from a small Mississippi town, Mary Allison McDaniel has fostered a love for culture and travel unique from her peers. Within her undergraduate education, she traveled and studied abroad in Jamaica, England, and Austria. Obtaining her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, Allison graduated Summa Cum Laude from the Honors department of The University of Southern Mississippi. Her Honors Thesis won an “outstanding research award” within her division. This thesis, *Women in Gaming: A Study of Female Players’ Experiences in Online FPS Games*, has since been published within the university’s research database. She is currently working on her master’s degree in National and Transnational Studies in Münster, Germany.