

the Escapist



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EDITOR'S NOTE

by **Julianne Greer**

Dragon Warrior was one of my favorite games as a child. This was a classic roleplaying game; it was high fantasy with dragons, "dosts" and "thous," and slimes of the red, blue and metal varieties. It probably would have been my favorite, but for one minor part: Gwaelin.

You see, Gwaelin was the princess of the land which had lately been harassed by the Dragonlord. Gwaelin had also been captured by aforementioned evil villain. One of the first tasks I was to take on as Belle, the self-named hero of the game, was to save young Gwaelin from this evil-doer.

OK. I could handle that. Several levels and dead slimes later, Gwaelin was back, safe and sound, at the castle with her father. There was much rejoicing and thanking me for saving the princess.

And then it happens. I make the mistake of talking to Gwaelin on my way out of the castle to continue on my adventures.

"Dost thou love me, BELLE?"

>Yes

>No

Huh? Oh, see ... I ... uh

>No (Well, I didn't want to lie.)

"But thou must!"

"Dost thou love me, BELLE?"

>Yes

>No

Um. Wow.

>No (Gwaelin, dear, I'm just ... not interested.)

"But thou must!"

"Dost thou love me, BELLE?"

>Yes

>No

At this point, it becomes abundantly clear that I will be stuck in this little loop of questioning until I compromise my personal identity as a female who likes males and answer, "Yes." So, after reasoning this away by saying to myself, "Sure, she is my Royal Princess and everyone 'loves' their royal rulers. And you know, it could be a sisterly, philos

love sort of thing, right?"

>Yes

And then came the music. The happy little "All Is Now Right with the World" ditty. Gag. Princess Gwaelin is sooo happy. And in her mind, you are quite certain, she is naming the future children of Princess Gwaelin and ... Princess Belle.

Now, I realize that videogames have been traditionally created for males. That has been the bread and butter demographic for games. But, with instances like the above, isn't it a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy? Yes, girls like romance and love and all that gooey stuff, but can't there be a "Female Hero" button? Where you rescue Prince Gunther?

This week's issue of The Escapist focuses on women in games and gaming. We have gathered several authors to discuss different issues facing women in the industry and the industry when dealing with women. Chris Crawford looks at games and women through the lens of evolutionary psychology. Bonnie Ruberg discusses the most powerful manifestation of the female in games. Pat Miller talks with a customer service

rep from GameStop about her experiences and thoughts in the retail channel. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of The Escapist.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: The article on the console and video game scene in Brazil I found fascinating. I had the pleasure to spend six months in Brazil a few years back and was astounded by the amount of "classic" gaming material for sale at street fairs and in more traditional retail venues.

Jonathon Howard

To the Editor: [Re: The New Mainstream] Interesting article..

One thing, you're going to have a hard time convincing true PC power users that "building your own PC just means you're

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broke.” On the contrary, many users, including myself, build custom rigs to get features that you **can’t** get from any current custom builder. I’ve been incorporating both small LCD displays and full LCD screens in the fronts of my cases for diagnostics for many years now. Try getting something similar from Falcon or Alienware.

I’ve also been using RAID 5 systems for quite some time. Try asking for that to be included in your next system build. There are many ways you can build a system faster than the fastest that Alienware, Falcon and other builders can offer.

Steve Sandberg

To the Editor: Alienware sucks. Noob.

Thomas Miller

To the Editor: As far as I know, the U. S. release of *Dead or Alive 2* for the Dreamcast is an integral version. There are four *DOA2* versions. There was the regular version, which was published worldwide and the only version to hit the shelves in the U.S. Next came the “Hardcore” version for the PS2, which

was also published worldwide. A little later, Team Ninja released *DOA2: Limited Edition* for the Dreamcast, except this time it was only released in Japan. Finally there’s *DOA2: Ultimate*, released worldwide for the Xbox.

I believe the confusion around the *DOA2* game released in the U.S. for the Dreamcast is due to the fact that the *Limited Edition* version never saw the light of day outside Japan. But I have to agree, it was much better than its first incarnation and the PS2 version at the time.

Paulo V. W. Radtke





Women in Games

by Chris Crawford

Twenty-four years ago, *Pac-Man* was the hit game. It was pretty primitive by today's standards: about 600v by 400h by eight colors and was, of course, a pure 2-D game. By any technical measurement, today's games are thousands of times superior to *Pac-Man*. But in one regard, nothing has changed. When somebody decided to build a woman's version of *Pac-Man*, the best they could come up with was giving *Pac-Man* a sex-change operation by putting a bow on his head and calling him "Ms. *Pac-Man*." Nowadays, the best we can come up with for women in gaming is giving them pink guns. Whoop-de-doo.

I have long since given up participating in discussions on women in gaming. The games industry is so out of touch, such discussions are a waste of perfectly good electrons. When Microsoft wanted to publicize an event for women at a Game Developers' Conference a few years back, they splashed around banners showing a woman in a low-cut dress. Some people just don't get it.

I'm going to offer a fresh approach to the problem, coming at it from a completely different angle: evolutionary psychology. This field is about 20 years old, and much exciting progress has been made in the years since it was established. The basic idea behind evolutionary psychology is we can learn something about modern human psychology by studying the evolutionary forces that shaped the minds of our ancestors. For example, early simians were frequently preyed upon by snakes. These days, snakes don't eat people. In fact, more people in America die from toy related accidents every year than from snakebites. Despite this, people don't freak out when you put a toy in their laps, but they do freak out when you put a snake on them. Our fear of snakes is in our genes.

Unfortunately, the field is often attacked by dogmatic fools who think evolutionary psychology amounts to some kind of genetic determinism. They claim fear of snakes is some sort of cultural artifact,

and that if only our culture stopped teaching people that snakes are fearsome, nobody would be afraid of snakes. A careful, scholarly analysis of this claim, based on experimental evidence and thorough review of the literature - as well as common experience - forces us to only one conclusion: This claim is complete crap.

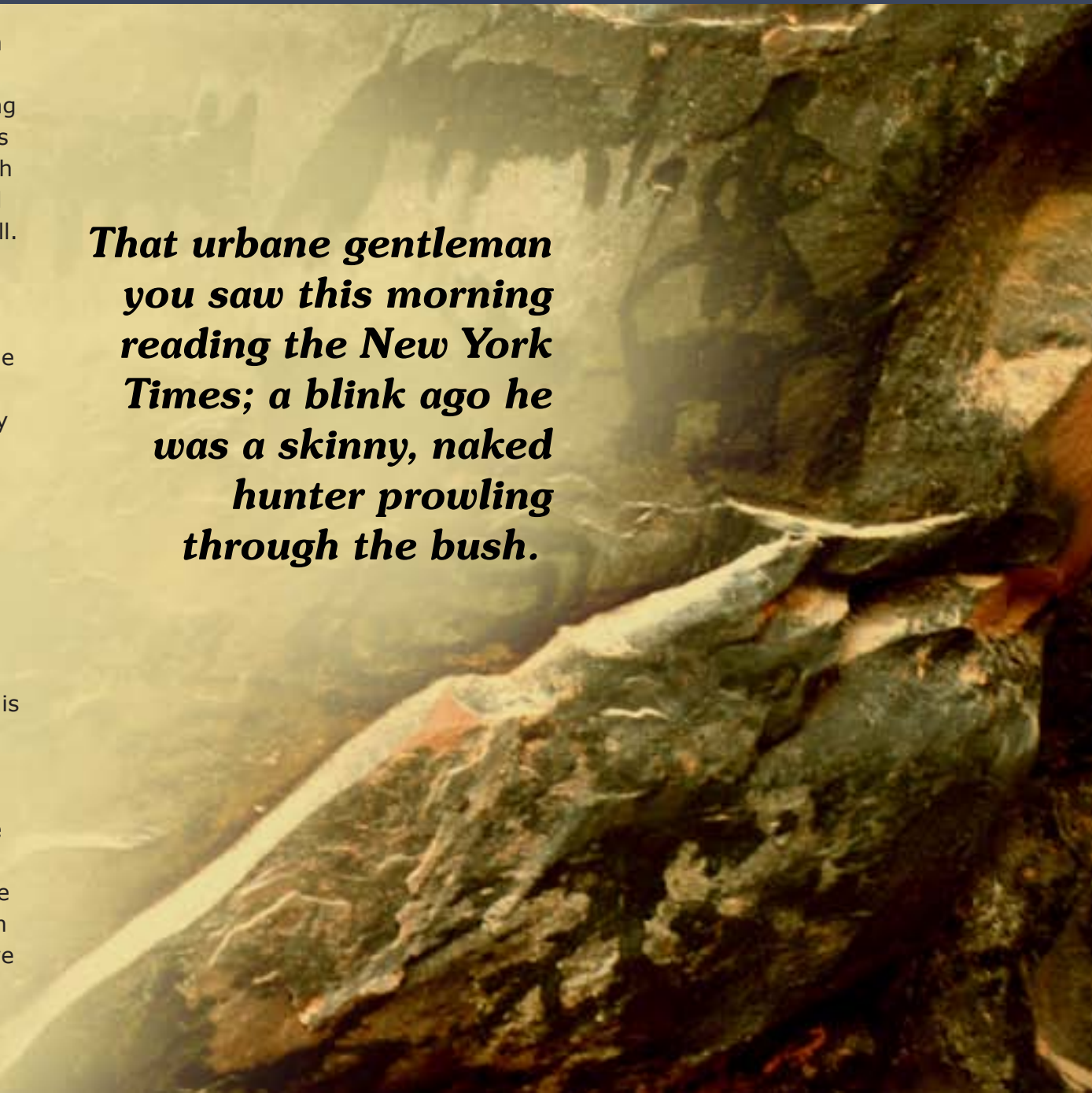
Human choices arise from three layered sources. At the bottom lies our physical condition: We eat because we are hungry, not because we have been taught by our parents to eat. In the middle lies our genetic heritage: We like meat because of our genetic makeup. On top of these is our cultural upbringing: Some cultures like to eat pig meat, while others don't. Our behavior is driven by all three forces, with the cultural element dominating in a great many situations - but not all.

So, let's examine gender differences in terms of human evolution. The very first point to establish is that our ancestors were hunter-gatherers. For the last 3 million years, our ancestors lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. This civilized urban lifestyle that we now live is a 6,000 year veneer on top of 3 million

years of hunter-gatherer life - less than 0.2% of our ancestry. That urbane gentleman you saw this morning reading the *New York Times*; a blink ago he was a skinny, naked hunter prowling through the bush. His mind has been fine-tuned over millions of years to do that job well. The elegant young woman you saw striding across the parking lot this morning; blink your eyes and she's on her haunches, gnawing on a bit of edible root she just clawed out of the soil with her fingers. Her mind has been similarly shaped by evolution.

So, what forces shaped these minds? More to our point, what different forces acted on men and women differently during hunter-gatherer times?

The biggest difference was men were hunters and women were gatherers. This gender specialization did not arise because of some male conspiracy to dominate women or some other nastiness. It was the natural, inevitable result of a basic physical difference between men and women: Women have breasts and men don't. Because women have breasts, they're the ones who have to feed the babies, and to feed the



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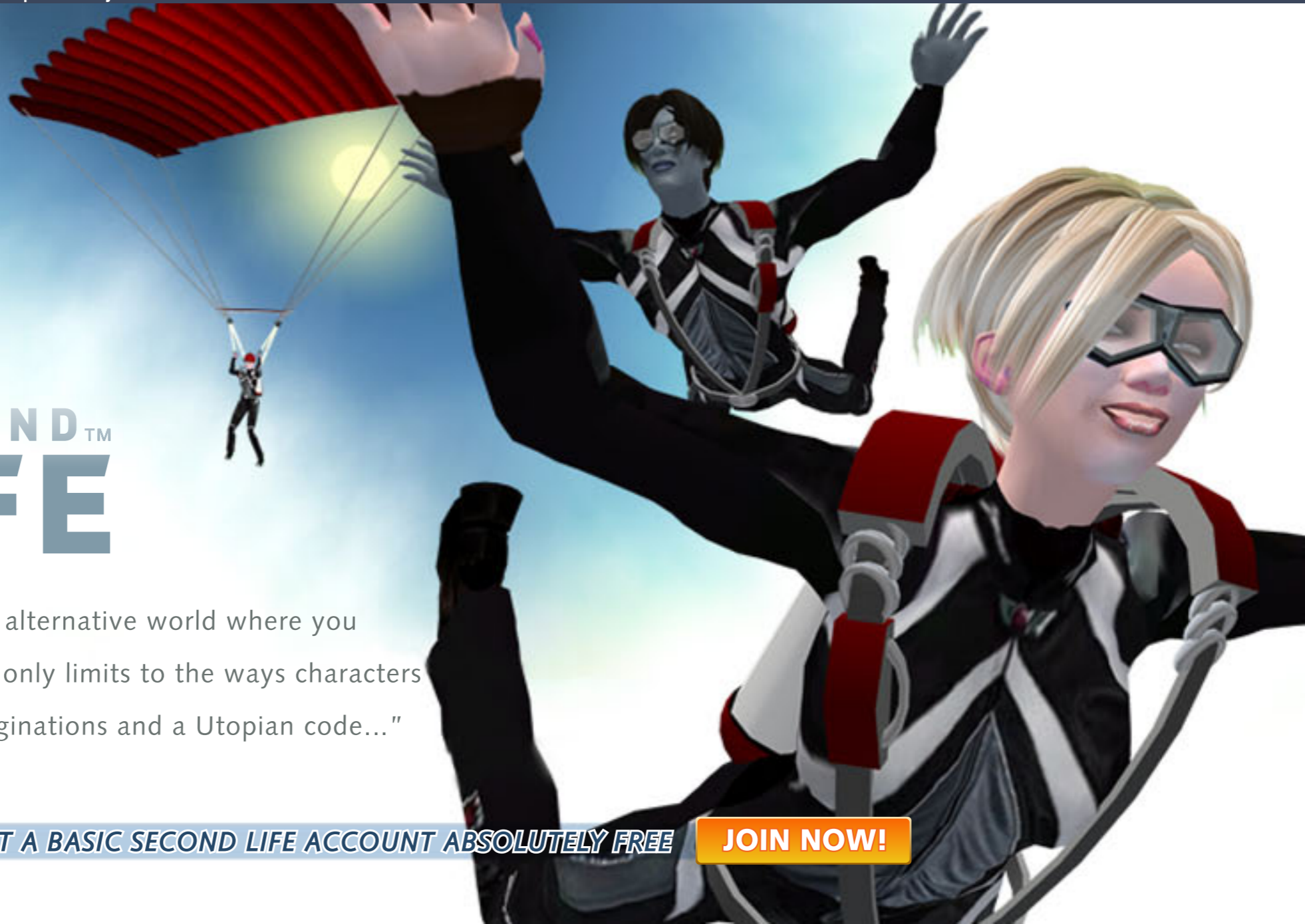
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babies, you have to stay close to the babies.

Human babies are truly pathetic creatures: They can't walk, they can't care for themselves, and they are completely dependent upon their mothers for the first two or three years of their lives. A mother carrying a fifteen-pound squalling baby is not going to be as successful stalking prey as a man. If the mother puts the baby down to stalk prey, the baby will get eaten by something else.

Another problem is women can't run as well as men. This has nothing to do with cultural upbringing and everything to do with the female pelvis. The male pelvis is well-structured for the efficient operation of the leg muscles. But the female pelvis has been subject to a more powerful selection effect: death in childbirth. Men

...over millions of years, the female pelvis spread wide, which is good for childbirth but lousy for running.

don't die in childbirth; women do, and over the millennia lots of women have. Women die in childbirth because the birth canal is too narrow for the head of the baby. Women with a narrow pelvis had a greater chance of dying in childbirth, but women with a wide pelvis had a higher survival rate. Thus, over millions of years, the female pelvis spread wide, which is good for childbirth but lousy for running.

At this point, there's always some twit who points out that there are some women who can run faster than some men. Indeed so, but noting an exception to a generalization does not disprove the generalization; it establishes only that the generalization is not an absolute law. There are a handful of genetically odd women who lack breasts, but we don't quibble about them when discussing the role of breasts in female function, do we?

Running fast and long is an important factor in successful hunting. Since human females couldn't do this, they weren't well-suited for hunting. Instead, females specialized in gathering and child-rearing. Thus, the overall hunter-gatherer lifestyle worked like this:

Hominids operated in troops of 20 to 50 individuals. They would set up a temporary camp near a source of water. The old, the infirm and the young would remain at the camp. The fit females would spread over the immediate vicinity, gathering nuts, berries, grain, roots, fruit; anything edible. Most of the food they would find was low in nutritional value, but they made up for it in volume.

The men would set out on long hunts. For most of human history, hunting was not carried out with bows and arrows or even spears; it was done with rocks. The hunter would creep up on his prey and hurl a rock at it. Of course, rocks seldom kill an animal outright. Most of the time, the best the hunter could hope for was a hit that might slightly injure the prey, who would run off. Then the hunter would set out in pursuit, which might take several hours. With luck, the hunter would get a second opportunity to bean the prey, which would result in further injury and another flight. The process

...men were hunters and women were gatherers.

would be repeated for hours - or, in the case of larger prey, days - and often failed. But when it succeeded, the hunter hit the jackpot. The meat in a 40 pound gazelle would provide a feast for everybody. If he failed, the hunter would return home for a meal of roots and berries.

Let us now consider the specializations required of the hunter to succeed in his efforts. Three talents are needed:

1. The ability to throw rocks powerfully and with accuracy.
2. The ability to pursue the prey over long distances.
3. The wit to figure out where the prey went.

If we were to whisk a young hunter-gatherer male out of the remote past into the present, dress him up in whatever the current uniform of youth happens to be and plunk him down in front of a videogame console, what kind of entertainment would he prefer?

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Something that he is optimized for, of course. It would be something in which he throws rocks powerfully and accurately at prey. Guns do that very well. He would also want to track his prey over a large spatial map, involving all manner of interesting problems in spatial analysis. Lastly, he'd want something challenging his ability to analyze and anticipate prey behavior. Golly gee, sounds just like a shooter, doesn't it?

So, this evolutionary psychology stuff isn't total balderdash. It does a decent job of predicting the kind of play that young males would prefer. Our next problem is to figure out what kind of play females would prefer. To do this, we must identify the specializations forced upon ancestral women.

Hunter-gatherer women did not succeed primarily because of their gathering skills. One of their primary tasks was raising children because, as I wrote earlier, they're the ones with the breast milk. There were many skills required to survive in those days, but one skill that was especially important for females (and not so important for males) was social reasoning. The sad truth, as any

modern mother can tell you, is a single mother cannot easily cope with the huge task of raising children alone. Even with all the conveniences of modern life, it's still an onerous job. Imagine just how much more difficult it must have been a hundred thousand years ago, when life was more precarious. A woman back then needed a lot of support to raise her children. Fortunately, she could recruit that support in a number of ways.

The first source of support was her own mother. Although the average life expectancy back then was only in the twenties, if you made it to adulthood, you stood a good chance of living to a ripe old age of 40, or even 50. This raised an interesting theoretical problem for evolutionary theory: Why did women continue to live after they aged after fertility? If she couldn't make babies, why did she continue to live, consuming valuable resources that could be devoted to her descendants? Would this not comprise a selection effect against living beyond menopause? One answer, it turns out, was that older women play a vitally important part in the upbringing of children: They're the grannies. Mom could go off gathering nuts, roots and berries while granny took care of the

kids. Granny might not be strong, but she could mind the kids adequately. Her contribution freed up Mom to provide more nutrition for the kids.

The second source of support came from the other women in the little hunter-gatherer band. They had learned that, by pooling their efforts, they could provide better care for their children. A daycare center operated by grannies with one or two lactating mothers on hand could take care of the kids and leave all the healthy young mothers free to gather food. But to make this work, the women had to cooperate. Each babysitting mother had to provide suck to every infant in need; how was an absent mother to know whether her own children were getting their fair share? This required trust, cooperation and



effective manipulation of the complex social structure of the female group.

The third source of support was the father. In those days, fatherhood was less secure than it is now. It was impossible for any man to know for certain if any given child was his own. It was not difficult for a woman to obtain fertilization from the guy with the best genes, while obtaining nutritional support from a lesser stud, fooling the cuckold into thinking the child his own.

...social reasoning is the skill that most differentiates women from men.

Men who fell for such tricks soon had their genes removed from the gene pool, leaving behind only those men who went to great lengths to ascertain the true paternity of the children they were supporting. This led to the common male obsession with the fidelity of his wife that we see so often today. From the woman's point of view, the problem was to manipulate the male into supporting her children, mostly by convincing him that the kids really were his.

Thus, women had strong selection pressures for their social skills in manipulating the social relationships in their clans. Over the millennia, women were selected for the gene pool based on their ability to mobilize the most nutritional support for their children. Modern-day descendants of these women are highly skilled in sensing the subtle moods of others, calculating their motivations, and determining the best means of turning this understanding to their own advantage. The overall collection of skills is called "social reasoning," and that's what women excel in.

At this point, I need to cover my butt against the picky-picky natterers who

will point out that there are some men who are better at social reasoning than some women. Yes, of course that's true. But social reasoning is the skill that most differentiates women from men. In spelling, arithmetic, cooking or any of a thousand other skills, women and men are closely matched, but when it comes to social reasoning, the advantage women enjoy is greater than any other advantage they possess. Thus, women are highly motivated to exercise and develop their social reasoning skills.

We should therefore expect that modern women might well want to exploit this talent in their entertainment. And in fact that turns out to be the case. The classic female mass entertainments are the soap opera and the bodice-ripper. In each of these, women face intense and intricate social conflicts requiring elevated social reasoning. In every case, it's the protagonist's special insight into people that carries the day. It's not the size of her breasts, how many antelopes she can kill, how many berries she can collect or how much money she can acquire. It's her social skills that make her the heroine, the champion, the role model.

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To offer a prime example, consider *Pride & Prejudice*. Elizabeth faces the most delicate and difficult social obstacles in developing and weighing her marital options against her own feelings. Other women around her make mistakes and marry the wrong men, but Elizabeth navigates her way through the jungle of English society as well as the uncertainties of her own emotions to a happy conclusion: marriage to the ideal partner.

All this leads to a suggestion for what might work for women in games: social reasoning. The ideal game for women, according to this simplified model, would

be some sort of interactive soap opera or bodice ripper, presenting the player with complex social problems as she seeks the ideal mate. Contrast this with the kind of software currently being offered to women and you can see why so little progress has been made with this group.

I close by reminding the reader that this is a greatly simplified representation of a complex subject. Human behavior is not reducible to linear equations, and we will never build a correct working model of human mental life. I have offered a simplistic representation of some concepts from evolutionary psychology that can provide useful insight into the

problems that game designers face in creating games for women. Insight, not solutions. Ideas, not answers. The reader who takes this material with the grain of salt it deserves should derive some benefit from this essay. Game designers interested in following up on this should consult any of the many works available on evolutionary psychology:

The Mating Mind,
by Geoffrey Miller (Magnificent!)
The Prehistory of Sex,
by Timothy Taylor (Solid)
Why is Sex Fun?
by Jared Diamond (short and sweet)

The Descent of Woman, The Descent of the Child and *The Scars of Evolution*,
by Elaine Morgan (provocative)
Mother Nature,
by Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (magisterial)
The Moral Animal,
by Robert Wright (best overall introduction to evolutionary psychology)



Chris Crawford has created 15 published games and 5 published books. He founded the Game Developers' Conference. He is now working on interactive storytelling.



Women Monsters and Monstrous Women:

Representing the Feminine in Survival Horror

by Bonnie Ruberg

The Question of Representation

In the world of games as we know it - where female characters are still, for the most part, either brainless beauties or nonexistent - a genre like survival horror stands out from the crowd. The constructive, in-game representation of women has always been an important issue in the fight toward gender equality in the video game industry. It's no surprise that female gamers often seek out titles that present strong, independent women. That this search, however, has brought to light survival horror games as prolific breeding grounds for such characters perhaps comes less expected. In these games, whose goal is the production of fear, gamers often play not as men but as gun-wielding, female protagonists.

By the numbers, it would seem that survival horror, as far as gender representation goes, has a leg up on other genres - that perhaps here women can find the role models lacking from many other areas of the market. Yet real representation isn't as simple as counting characters.

In order to fully understand the portrait of the feminine painted by survival horror, we need to look at the implications of the roles, the archetypal images, it presents. This evaluation does more than simply teach us about the qualities of one genre. It uncovers larger male perceptions of women, both in the games industry and society itself.

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Viewed through this lens, the beautiful damsel transforms into a doll, and the traditional heroine risks losing her power. We are thus forced to search for new role models outside the expectations of male-dominated culture, in the realm of the monstrous.

Damsels, Heroines and Monsters: Exploring Feminine Roles

Female characters in survival horror games are typically cast in one of three roles: damsels, heroines or monsters. A woman of the first category is one who is in danger, who requires the help of a man in order to save her from certain demise. She exerts almost no active force, except as the attractive bait that entices the main character to fight his way against terrifying odds, with the hope of chivalrously saving her (and, in all fairness, himself).

For example, take Ashley in *Resident Evil 4*, who, for the majority of the game, does little more than shout, "Leon, help!" while bouncing around in a tight sweater and a schoolgirl skirt. Moreover, she's the president's daughter; talk about a damsel in distress. Look at Eileen from *Silent Hill 4: The Room*, the cute, blond next door neighbor, who, like Ashley,

ends up as a tag-along, non-playable character whom the strong male protagonist must watch over and keep alive.

This role is a common representation of women in historical storytelling, if not in survival horror games. Here, as elsewhere, it reinforces stereotypical gender expectations. When danger arrives, men will act bravely and women will need saving. The world has yet to see a horror title that features a bold female character forced to drag around a weak, whimpering male NPC. The image of the damsel, of course, has implications for the perceived role of women within our larger culture. But it also reflects on the industry's lack of awareness and respect for the female gamer, who, in order to identify with a character, must either strip herself of her femininity and subsume her gender with the masculine, or in retaining her sex assume the position society has prescribed for her, that of the helpless damsel - or simply refuse to identify, and exist in an identity-ambiguous middle ground.

More uplifting, perhaps, are the female characters who fill the role of the



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heroine. Survival horror remains unique in that, within the genre, women protagonists are not a noted exception. If they can't be called the norm, they are at least normal. Jill Valentine, of *Resident Evil* fame, comes to mind as a classic example. She's tightly clothed, but not outrageously so, and she can shoot herself a mean zombie. Alexandra from *Eternal Darkness* is another tough, well-grounded lady who fights her way through the forces of creepiness, albeit with the help of a lot of male relatives. True, she isn't sporting what most of us would consider ideal monster-battling attire, but if I were her, my insanity

Men, as the ones most often holding the controllers, exercise control over playable female characters...

meter would have been off the charts, and for that I have to give her credit. The meeker, though still effective Mio of *Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly*, armed with only a camera, rounds off the sampler of heroines.

Each of these heroic women seems a good role model candidate, especially in

comparison to the damsels discussed above. Yet even such seemingly empowered female characters come with ambiguous implications. While their presence does speak to certain pro-gender equality ideals - more representation of capable women in games, more opportunities to play as women - their submissive relationship to interactivity puts them once again at the mercy of male gamers.

Men, as the ones most often holding the controllers, exercise control over playable female characters, redistributing the power balance in favor of the male.

And while there's something innately sadistic about this interaction, there's also something highly voyeuristic. Male gamers often claim to enjoy playing as women, not because they are interested in stepping into their shoes, but because it gives them a chance to stare at attractive female characters. Granted, women gamers could be said to be doing

the same thing when they play as men, but given the less-sexualized depiction of males in games, and the significantly smaller percentage of women holding the controllers, the implications of such a phenomenon would be almost negligible. The fact remains: Onscreen women, however brave in-game, are simultaneously performers for their primarily male audience.

Weak women, strong women; damsels, heroines. Both choices are questionable at best. So what route is left for truly empowered female characters? To be less than women, but also more than women. Female monsters, though certainly rarer than their male counterparts, have appeared in a number of survival horror series, such as *Silent Hill*, whose hellish demons have always included recognizably feminine ones.

The ghosts of *Fatal Frame II* are more or less equally male and female.

Who could forget the terrifying sight of the Woman in the Box, well, crawling out of a box? *Resident Evil* confronted the issue of monstrous women with the introduction of Lisa Trevor, once a lonely

The fact remains: Onscreen women, however brave in-game, are simultaneously performers for their primarily male audience.

little girl but now an invincible, chain swinging creature, in the Gamecube remake of the original series title. The idea lived on, finding its way into *Resident Evil 4* as a handful of pitchfork-wielding female enemies dispersed among the zombie-like townspeople.

The dichotomy of damsels versus heroines is one constantly debated by feminists, in and outside of the gaming world. The issue of women monsters, on the other hand, is discussed far less frequently. In dealing with monsters, the question is no longer one of activeness or passivity, but of self and other. In some ways, women monsters in survival horror represent a new type of gender equality. They have been stripped of the cultural niceties normally associated with the feminine, and can be fought and

In dealing with monsters, the question is no longer one of activeness or passivity, but of self and other.

killed with as little hesitation as men. At the same time, in most video games, female enemies appear much less frequently than do male.

Should we be pushing for equal representation as the gaming other in the same way we push for equal representation as the gaming self? Why do only men get to be the bad guys? We still have to keep in mind that most gamers are male. Do we really want to provide more women for them to hunt down and kill? Of course it looks bad, but in the end, is it really any worse than killing men? These issues, while important, remain relatively unexplored. Like many questions of gender equality, they have no easy answers.

The Implications of Fear: Intimacy and the Uncanny

The questions above ask again and again: What "should be" in video games? As both game analysts and members of a larger gaming community, we often get caught up in these questions. Yet, once we move beyond the topic of what "should be" in video games we can begin to constructively talk about games for what they already are - giving ourselves the best possible chance to understand

the culture around us. What can we learn from the representation of women monsters in survival horror, as it stands? Perhaps the easiest way to broach the subject is through the very heart of the genre itself: fear. Everything in a horror game, which has been created with the main purpose of frightening the gamer, can be illuminated with the question: What makes this scary?

The representation of gender roles is no exception. Damsels, for example, are scary because of their potential to come to harm. The player fears for them, especially if they are NPCs whose safety depends directly on the protagonist. They are unable to defend themselves, a frightening idea in a game world full of nasty creatures and hazards. This is scary, both for themselves and for their protectors, who must worry about their own safety while protecting their damsels.

Heroines, on the other hand, are not scary because they hinder the player, but because they are the player. All of the weakness and vulnerability the gamer associates with femininity in the case of the damsel is transferred onto the female protagonist, making the



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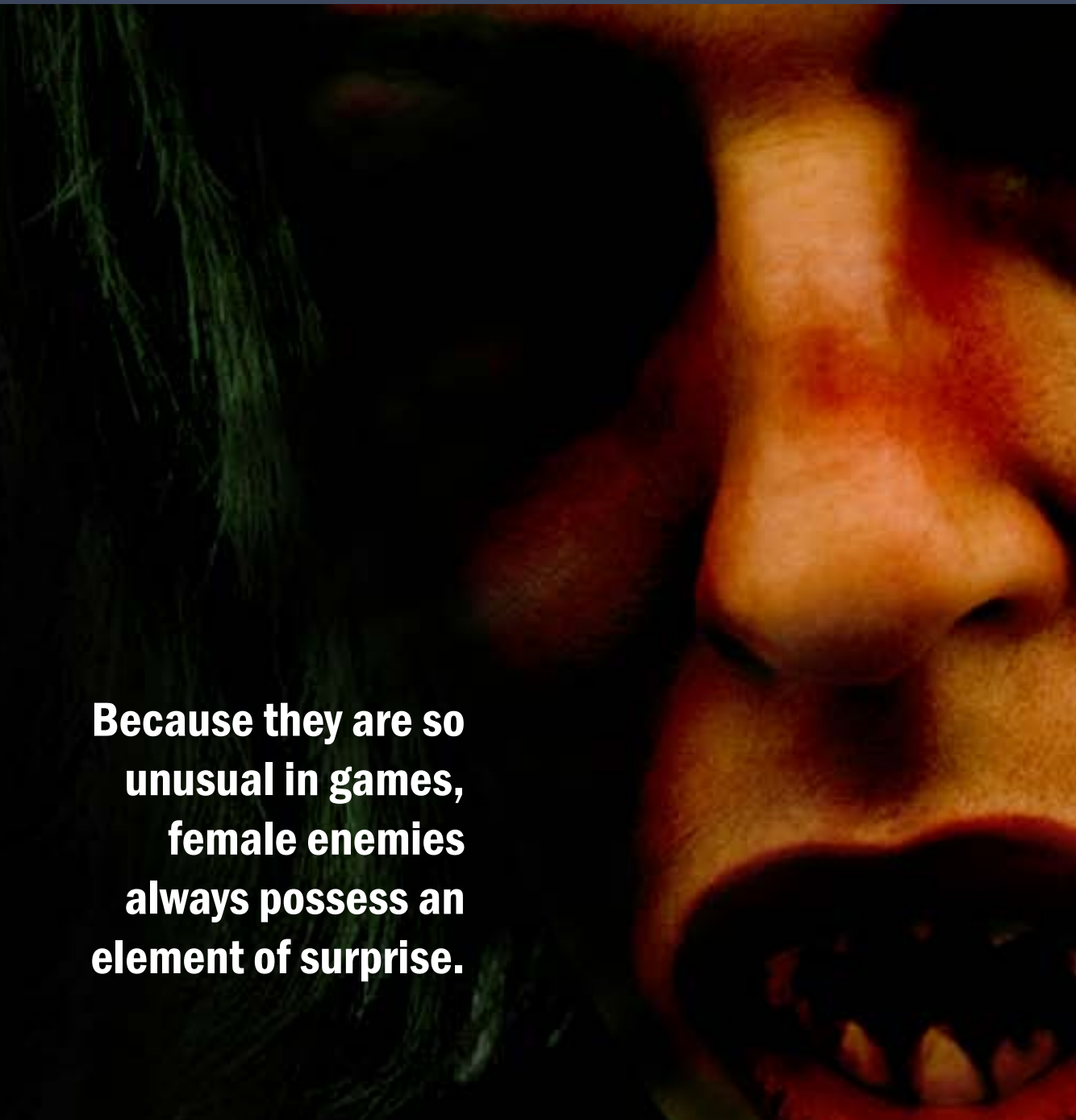
experience terrifying for the player, who feels himself more susceptible to harm in the skin of a woman. The idea of roaming a haunted village, for example, would be a lot less unnerving if you could play as a big, brawny man with camouflage gear and combat boots, instead of a frail, pale-faced girl in a matching skirt set. Here, again, we see the heroine not as a model for the empowered female, but as a device with an end clearly bound by traditional gender expectations.

What, then, makes women monsters scary? Indeed, they are potently frightening. Perhaps it is because they represent such an undeniable disruption of the norm because they are capable of effectively producing fear. Because they are so unusual in games, female enemies always possess an element of surprise. They produce shock. But this shock is not only due to their in-game rarity, but also the abnormal nature of their behavior, as compared to accepted standards of womanly conduct.

Here in front of the player is a woman, a symbol of comfort and submissiveness. Yet she bears claws, fangs, rotting flesh. Suddenly, that femininity which culture

has taught him should be beautiful comes before him as unrelentingly, unapologetically ugly. That femininity which he believed should serve him attempts, without sympathy or remorse, to devour his very body. That femininity which society has told him to protect, he must kill - not peacefully, respectfully, but in the most violent of manners, one befitting the slaughter of an animal. Now, that which was the most tamed is most wild; that which was once most humane is most foreign.

It is precisely this unwillingness to yield to expectations that makes the female monster so terrifying. Released by her monstrosity from the constraints of culture (or perhaps made a monster by her disavowal of them), she completes a dialectic of womanhood. As a woman, she is the most familiar, but as a monster, the unknown; this combination makes her uncanny. She is the ultimate other to the male gaming self, in her extra-humanness as well as her gender. She is unspeakable, and therefore cannot speak. She is the awful, and for this reason powerful; the Terrible Female.



Because they are so unusual in games, female enemies always possess an element of surprise.

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The woman monster stands as well outside the normal sexual boundaries of complacent femininity. In her undeniable association with death, she exudes sexual energy - two forces that are inextricably linked in the human mind - and introduces a dynamic of sexuality into situations where none existed previously. Before the gamer, she is a sexual predator. She is a zombie, in more ways than one, in that she is untamed in her desire for the consumption of flesh. This threat of sexual dominance is, perhaps subconsciously, as frightening to the gamer as the literal threat of in-game death. At the same time, the sexual interplay her presence creates makes the situation at hand more intimate, implicating the player to a higher degree in the extreme violence at hand, and therefore making his own actions terrifying.

Women Gamers as Monsters: Embracing the Other

Monsters, by definition, are altered human beings. Zombies, for example, fit this mold nicely, as do ghosts and vampires. Women monsters, as seen above, have been altered not just physically, but also ideologically. They've

changed themselves by stepping outside the accepted image of complacent womanhood. Yet they possess the remnants of humanity. We, in turn, see ourselves in the monsters. We begin to understand our own monstrosity, our own departure from the "human."

Women gamers are in this way also monsters. We - indeed, all intelligent, independent females - break the accepted standards of womanhood. We have defamed our traditional femininity by dabbling in a supposedly male world, that of video games. As many men would readily agree, we have made

ourselves a monstrosity. In hopes of fighting this image, women have struggled for years to convince the gaming industry of our true humanity; they have sought out power and respect.

Women, of course, have a right to want strong female characters in the games they play. But maybe they've been looking in the wrong places. What better role model than the monster, whose ability to incite fear is so powerful it reaches out from the game? In the

parallel worlds of survival horror and the gaming industry, both dotted with damsels and heroines, perhaps it's time to turn and embrace ourselves, the monsters. 📺

Bonnie Ruberg is a video game journalist specializing in gender and sexuality in games and gaming communities. She also runs a blog, Heroine Sheik, dedicated to such issues. Most recently, her work has appeared at The A.V. Club, Gamasutra, and Slashdot Games.



Confessions of a Gamestop Girl

by Pat Miller

Rachel Chai and I are sitting in an outdoor plaza of Los Angeles's Little Tokyo. It's an overcast Saturday afternoon. I, in undoubtedly terrible journalistic form, ordered a bowl of medium-spicy *chashu ramen*, and I'm doing my best to slurp away from the mic so as not to risk obscuring part of the conversation. Every minute is critical with her, as she deftly navigates from one topic to another without so much as a sentence break. Later, when I transcribe this interview, I will be eternally grateful that we went to lunch, as every pause for breath or food is a tiny opportunity for me to collect my thoughts. At just 21 years old, Rachel is a veteran girl gamer, and her insights into the male-dominated world of video games are something I don't want to miss - even if it means my ramen gets cold.

She sits back in her chair while we dance through the awkward small talk that precedes the actual interview stuff. She's just maybe a little taller than average, wearing jeans and a gray tank top that look comfortably casual, and her light skin and dark brown, highlighted hair betray her half Korean, half German genetic ancestry. I try to subtly nudge her into talking about the interesting stuff; namely, her time working at Gamestop (six months in two different locations). She wastes no time.





"All my real hardcore gamer friends were girls," she tells me. "We used to sit around and play all the time. At Gamestop, I was the only one working there. That was frickin' weird. I'd get hit on like mad if I was wearing something cute to work. They'd always try to get away with paying less, too - you know, 'Could you do this for me, just this one time?' and all that." She pauses to sip her water and continues, "You always get those guys who just wouldn't think that you know anything, so they'd just be like, 'Oh, can I talk to the assistant manager, can I talk to that guy over there instead of you?' And then they'd be confused when you, you know, **actually** knew something. Everyone was astonished when they found out I played roleplaying games - 'Do you play *Final Fantasy X*? *Final Fantasy X-2*?' - and get surprised when I started listing *Illusion of Gaia* and *Soulblazer*."

I'm a little surprised, too; not at the names she dropped to establish her gaming pedigree, of course. Being in this line of work shows you really quickly that there are gamers with much harder cores than yourself. What struck me was the organic ease with which she discusses issues of sexism, gender

discrimination and *Illusion of Gaia* without stopping to pick at her noodle plate. It's as if dealing with this crap is just as much a natural part of life as *Soulblazer*, and that is genuinely a depressing thought.

She must have noticed the conversation's sudden mood swing, for she quickly switches stories to a slightly more upbeat anecdote. "This 18-year-old kid used to come up to me and ask me, 'What did you think of *Super Mario RPG*?' so while I worked we'd sit there and talk about role-playing games and stuff. And then when we were closing, I basically had to shove him out the door, and he asked me if I wanted to see a movie some time," she says. "I was thinking, 'Awww, you're cute, okay?' I ended up playing *Smash Brothers* at his house and kicking his ass."

That sounds like a decent date to **me**.

"But then he told me, 'You know, it's funny, all the girls I've dated can beat me at *Smash Brothers*.' And I just said, 'Wow, that's great, I gotta go.' He was cute, I'm just not looking for anything right now." Poor kid. *C'est la vie*, I suppose.

“I guess girls just can't play Super Mario Brothers, even though everyone and their mother has played Super Mario Brothers.”

“By the way, the greatest thing to do when you're a girl is bulls**t that you know a lot about sports games. You know, sports games just really aren't my thing, they're probably fun but I just didn't get into them, and people will be like, 'So what did you think of *Madden 2005*?' and I'd just tell them, 'Oh, I dunno, I liked *Madden 2004* a lot more because of blah, and blah, and blah.' No one would ever call me on it,” she tells me, perhaps in an attempt to divest our conversation of this serious undertone once and for all. “*Confessions*” indeed; I resolve to never ask a Gamestop clerk for purchasing advice again.

But alas, one depressing anecdote and a failed pick-up attempt do not an article make, so I press on. “I got these

mothers a lot,” she begins, signifying to me that the topic of men was exhausted. “One of them, she comes up to me and asks, 'What do you think would be great for a little girl?' A friend of mine later told me that he started cracking up because he thought the lady asked the wrong person. I just showed her all these Game Boy Advance games because she mentioned it, but whenever I asked her what the little girl was into, she just replied, 'Oh, I don't know, something girly?' and left it at that. I suggested *Advance Wars* and she said she didn't think that's girly enough. I tried anything that was pink, or like, happy, like *Super Mario Brothers*, and apparently it just wasn't good enough for her. I guess girls just can't play *Super Mario Brothers*, even though everyone **and their mother** has played *Super Mario Brothers*.”

I pause for a second and stare into my soup bowl, trying to figure out whether the irony of that last bit was intentional or not, but that doesn't seem to stop her. “She picks up the *Bratz* game and just says, 'I think this will do.' I'm not going to be like, 'Hey, no, lady, put that down.' I **tried** to save the kid. No *Bratz* games for me, though. Me, I played Intellivision

as a little kid. I think my first game was *Burger Time*. I loved that s**t.”

By now, visibly excited about the opportunity to tell more stories, she dives into the topic of fellow girl gamers, leaving her half-eaten lunch aside entirely. “I was so happy when other women came in. Oh my God, it was great. On the whole, interacting with girls was really exciting. I'd just be like, 'Hi guys, umm...I love you...' But it depended on the girl. Some girls really

“That's what I'm always afraid of, you know, that someone's going to be like 'Oh, you're just getting that for your brother, or your boyfriend, or something.'”

hated me, they'd assume I didn't know anything, like they were sexist against me the same way the guys were.” She stops again for a second to collect her thoughts. “There are a lot of elitist gamers out there, no matter what gender they are. And it frustrates me.”

Something makes her pause again, and her facial expression reveals an internal conflict that her voice, suddenly

measured and much more reflective, confirms. “I don't want to be elitist, either, but I kind of feel insulted sometimes when all these girls start gaming now and claim they're old school. Like, 'I played *Final Fantasy X*, I'm so old school; I play *World of Warcraft*, I'm so hardcore.' What the hell?”

Another break for reflection. “Is that bad?”

I don't know what to say. Certainly the game snob hidden somewhere in me can sympathize with her. I imagine I get just as irritated when people think they're a hot commodity because they **totally played *Street Fighter 2***, back in the day, and thought Blanka was just **so cool** because he, like, **bit people's heads** and stuff. But I have also experienced the opposite. That is, the gamer who insists that he (or she!) is better than

me because he just had to have a perfect *Final Fantasy VIII* save file. No, Rachel, I don't think it's bad. Just, well, human, I guess.

But the moment passes, and she resumes chatting as if the topic had never been broached in the first place. From here she begins talking about another girl gamer anxiety of hers: "I should have said something smarter to [the writer and illustrator of popular web comic *Penny Arcade*] Tycho and Gabe when I saw them at E3. Instead I was just like, 'Thank you for everything,' and I was so overwhelmed, it was ridiculous. I felt like such an idiot. I felt like I should have said something intelligent so they didn't think I was just getting it for my boyfriend or something. That's what I'm always afraid of, you know, that someone's going to be like 'Oh, you're just getting that for your brother, or your boyfriend, or something.'"

And here, I think, something clicks: something from what she said, and something from what I thought. I begin to feel a little bit ashamed. Why is it that I, who spend more time writing about gamers than actually gaming these days, am granted the presumption that I can

take games seriously, but Rachel, whose apartment is saturated in *Castlevania* posters and assorted RPG soundtracks, is forever stuck with *Bratz* games and buying presents for her brothers or her boyfriends? How many men and women and boys and girls have innocently and unthinkingly passed her up as another know-nothing gaming ditz?

How many times have **I** done that?

The rest of the evening is fairly uneventful. We pick up the tab, get our parking validated and head back to our homes and loved ones after a brief session of *Pop'n Music 11*. She has nothing more to say. Aside from a few brief comments about designing costumes (her other primary hobby), traveling and school, the conversation is fairly brief. I'm glad she's gotten a chance to tell it like she sees it. But I do believe I am long overdue for my own "Confessions" at some point. If Rachel's stories ring true to anyone else, perhaps a good many of us are. 📧

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long.



What is a Galaxy Without Stars? Drop the Sexism, Bring the Women

by M. Junaid Alam

With the swiftness of a desert sand storm, the data streamed its way from cyberspace onto my hard drive. The demo for *Prince of Persia: Warrior Within* was within reach. My 12-year-old brother and I enjoyed the earlier iteration, *Sands of Time*, and we eagerly anticipated this new release. After firing up the game, we found ourselves impressed with the fiery maelstrom of mayhem unfolding on a ship deck, as the dark-edged prince prowled about, punching and dicing pirates at our command.

But the thrilling experience soon walked the plank when we came across the end boss: an absurdly-proportioned woman donning a chain-mail thong bikini, and little else. As heavy rain poured down, no less. Both my brother and I found this ridiculous. It was impossible to take the game seriously; the woman's every movement revealed a risible mockery of the female form and insulted our intelligence. Exit game, uninstall and abandon ship.

the Escapist

This was not, of course, the first time I discovered crude objectification of women in a computer game, but I still found the phenomenon dismaying. Console and PC games have now become an integral part of American culture; they generate billions of dollars in revenue for companies and hundreds of hours of entertainment for youth and adults alike. So with a massive market and the fanciest vertex shaders this side of the Milky Way, how do we still find ourselves mired in the age-old denigration of women that's marred gaming for years?

Clearly, it's high time that male gamers take it upon themselves to examine this question. In so doing we can – albeit only partially and humbly – descry how and why the sphere of PC gaming has alienated women and what can be done to set things right.

Broadly speaking, one of the greatest impulses that drives many of us into PC gaming is a sense of escape, abandoning the problems and pressures of the real world for a headlong flight of fantasy into simulation, roleplaying and science fiction. There are no bullying jocks, intimidating rites or daunting stereotypes

to contend with in the imaginative world of gaming – none that we can't make mince meat out of with a mouse click, anyway.

But ironically, the opposite is often true when it comes to the way women are depicted in games. Indeed, all the stereotypes and pressures imposed on women in outside society – slender curves, massive breasts, perfect hips, and submissiveness – have been reinforced and even intensified. As Roger Boal, an avid 31-year-old PC gamer from the arid state of Arizona, says, "Usually female characters are portrayed as primarily sexual objects."

Examples abound – and we clearly notice them. Boal points out that in almost every fantasy game, the better armor class an item has the more skin it exposes on the females. Dave Alvarado, 26, of Texas, concurs, noting that in one of his favorite genres, MMOGs, the game *World of Warcraft* features "night elves [sic]... whose dance animation is obviously a striptease." And then, as David Hodgson, a 28-year-old gamer from across the pond in the U.K., reminds us, there is the shining example of *Tomb Raider*, in which "the heroine is

a ridiculous portrayal of a woman with enormous, gravity defying breasts."

That women are portrayed in ways that reproduce rather than transcend the pressures they themselves face in real life is not, of course, a conscious conspiracy concocted by male gamers. As Bryan McIntosh, a 21-year-old from Canada who has played on the PC for the past 12 years says, the sexist depiction of women in games is partially "a reflection of what the publisher or (less frequently it seems) developer thinks gamers want." Duncan Kimpton, 26, from the Netherlands, agrees, saying that sexism in games is "more likely an indication of what... producers think will sell."

But frankly, this is a moot point. Whether by inertia or by the hand of developers, the sexist and dehumanizing portrayal of women in games is, ultimately, driven by

All the stereotypes and pressures imposed on women in outside society – slender curves, massive breasts, perfect hips, and submissiveness – have been reinforced and even intensified.



BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT



demand. If serious change is going to come about in this area, **we** are going to need to make it happen, by insisting on games that are thick on substance and thin on sexism. This is particularly true because, as PC gamers, we hold two key advantages: One, we tend to fall into a more mature demographic of gamers that – in theory, anyway – transcends the testosterone-driven daydreams of young teenagers; and two, our platform, with its mouse and keyboard configuration, lends itself to more involving and complex gameplay than consoles do.

The evidence for potential progress and the means to achieve it is there, at least anecdotally. Alvarado gives us an example in the thinking person's FPS, *Half-Life 2*, in which Alyx, a woman of smarts, "helps you out of as many bad spots as you help her out of." Boal cites the under-rated title *Beyond Good and Evil*, a game graced with not only a

Contrary to myth, women are not duplicates of
Laura Wingfield from *The Glass Menagerie*.

powerful dialogue that brought him to tears, but also a "strong-willed female" protagonist to deliver it. An equally intricate game with a powerful female lead was *Planescape: Torment*, in which the female character possessed "a degree of strength, pride, and dignity uncommon to most other female characters," says Jason Kalishek, an 18-year-old RPG fan from Wisconsin.

The opportunity to drop puerile sexist imagery and bring women into the fold of PC gaming should not be missed. Contrary to myth, women are not duplicates of Laura Wingfield from *The Glass Menagerie* who will need Barbie Doll games to woo them to PC gaming. The protagonists highlighted above illustrate that plenty of excitement can be provided by female leads who will, in turn, bring in female gamers – not to speak of richer gameplay options. Additionally, as McIntosh says, most women gamers are "confident enough not to feel threatened" by sexist imagery, merely finding it annoying and disappointing.

Annoying and disappointing, however, are enough to keep women gamers

alienated and outside the arena of PC gaming. As we well know, that would be a serious loss for them – but it would also be a serious loss for us. For we can delve into the depths of our fantasies, striding across landscapes in scooter bikes and soaring along lunar eclipses in starships, but what an unnecessarily cold and lonely journey it will be if we continue to ignore the dreams and visions of the women who could be riding alongside us.

To transform the status quo requires us male gamers to reboot and reconsider our collective thinking. Like Windows XP and a creaky DOS program, the lofty goal of a more fulfilling and fruitful gaming experience and the bleak reality of denigration and objectification of half the population are utterly incompatible. The solution is clear: Exit sexism, uninstall – women gamers, welcome aboard. 🚪

M. Junaid Alam is a journalism student at Northeastern University, a political commentary writer for the university paper, and a freelance reporter for The Sun Chronicle in North Attleboro, MA.

Then and Now

by Danielle “Schant” Vanderlip

As a woman who has managed to stumble her way into the gaming world, I’ve seen the advent of the home gaming system, the height of coin-op arcades, the first forays into home computing and the beginning of the internet. Technology has blazed ahead at breakneck pace ever since. The only things that seem to be dragging along are the perceptions of females as gamers and as professionals within the game development industry. We continue to struggle to this day to define who we are in that world and are discovering ourselves to be a diverse and diaphanous demographic.

Perhaps I have a unique perspective, having been raised on gaming from its inception. I don’t recall ever being told I couldn’t play because I was a girl. Instead, I put up with the usual little sister stigma and forced myself into everything my older brother was doing, be it reading his comic books and novels, muscling in on his *Dungeons and Dragons* games, or stealing time on his

computer. The Atari was thankfully a family item from the start, and I spent much of my time flipping the score on *Pitfall* or *Asteroids*. My childhood was spent as a tomboy, relatively untouched by the gender issue.

In my twenties, my weekends usually found me at some friend’s LAN party. We’d lug mid-tower CPUs and antiquated CRT monitors to someone’s overly cramped, badly ventilated apartment to spend a night drinking “swill” (which was really canned Nestea) and playing. I was often the only female in attendance. On rare occasion, a gaming troglodyte would enter into our group and remark on the “cute girl” that was going to attempt to play along. I wouldn’t be honest if I didn’t say the cries of anguish over being killed or beaten by a girl weren’t enjoyable.

But it wasn’t until I made the decision to attend a tech school that I realized how sheltered I had been from the traditional

bias toward women in technology. I was one of three to five women attending out of about 200 students. For the first time, I felt I was an oddity wandering the halls in this predominantly male school. For the first time, I felt intimidated based on gender alone. Most importantly, no one was encouraging gaming or animation as a real career option, in any capacity.

As such, I’d say that my career in gaming began as a happy accident. While I had gone to school with the intentions of attaining a degree in multimedia, things just hadn’t fallen my way. After leaving school, I created a small web design company and began writing, on the side, for a small fan site called Aerynth Atheneum for the MMOG, *Shadowbane*. It wasn’t until I became involved more deeply in the *Shadowbane* community that things began to look up. I made a few waves as a female author, and when the site manager of Shadowbane Vault, Chris Mancel, was hired by Ubi Soft to become



Shadowbane's Community Manager, he offered me his former job. I spent my time working to cultivate my little corner of the community, while occasionally interjecting on behalf of other female gamers.

From there, new avenues began to open up. Brady Games was venturing into the realm of MMOG strategy guides, and were starting off with *Shadowbane*. When Brady asked Chris Mancil for names, he gave them mine and my soon-to-be co-author John Henderson's. Little did I know this would lead to two more book contracts with Brady Games for Artifact Entertainment's *Horizons* and for Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*. I believe I was the first female author Brady had ever worked with. But like all good things, it didn't come easy.

Trying to juggle pregnancies and later, two small children, as well as my work was not as easy as they make it seem on television. While co-workers were ordering in pizza and sleeping late, I was juggling grocery shopping, diapering, feedings, gaming, writing and very limited amounts of sleep. It was as if I blinked and both of my children were walking despite the fact they were never

far away from me by my desk. My co-workers were infinitely patient with me, but I grew more and more frustrated with attempting to handle working at home and taking care of a family.

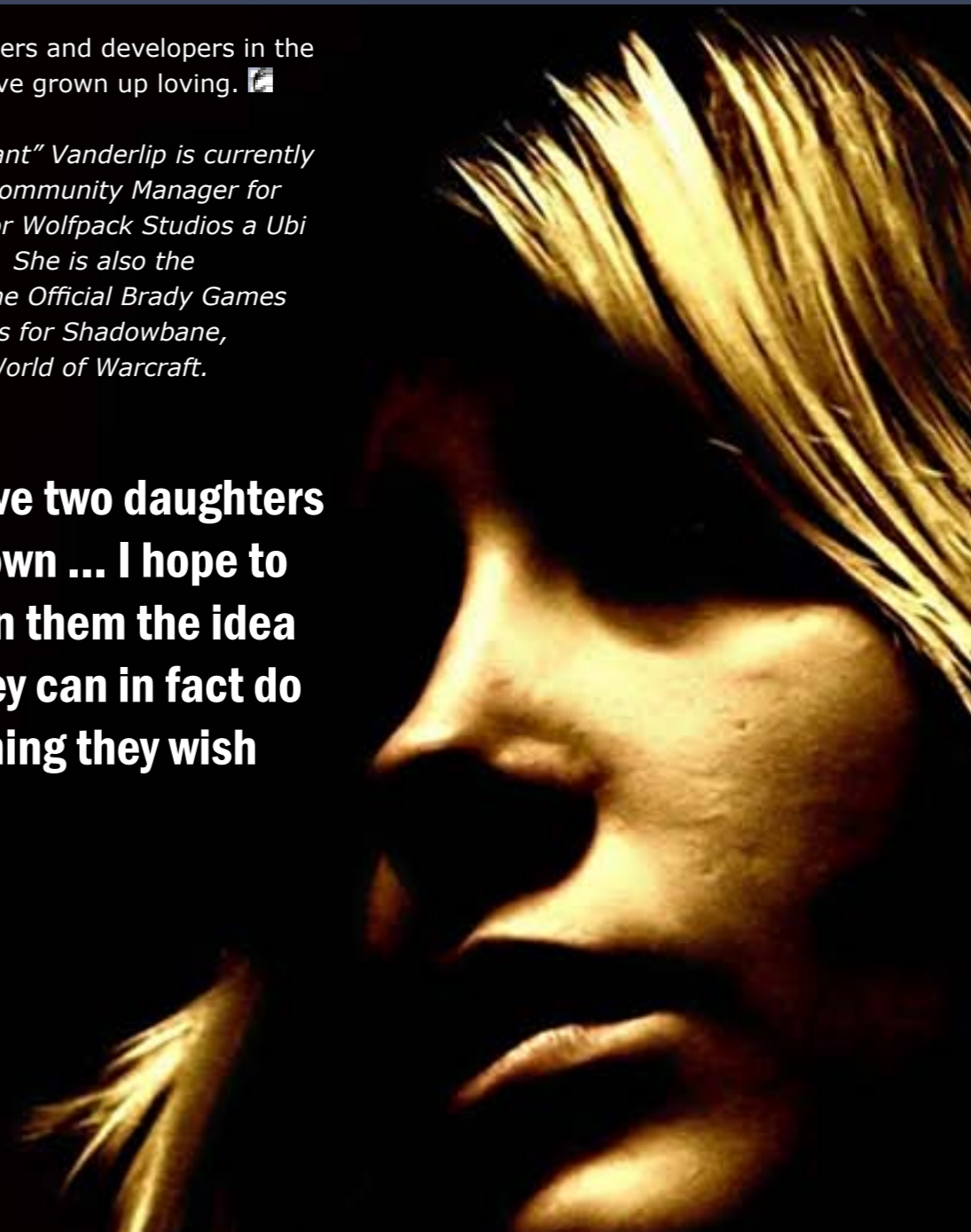
After many years, I've returned to my community roots and work as the Assistant Community Manager of *Shadowbane*. Some would say I have been lucky, and I would agree. I've seen an evolution among the female gaming population. We once were a hidden demographic and we now find ourselves openly struggling to pronounce our existence without wielding a sledgehammer. We are daughters, sisters and mothers of all ages, types and interests.

I now have two daughters of my own. While I continue to make my way fumblingly through this strange world of gaming, I hope to instill in them the idea that they **can** in fact do anything they wish, even pursue a career in the game development industry. Some things have changed since I was a girl, working my way to carpal tunnel on an Atari controller. Some things still need to change when it comes to acknowledging

women as gamers and developers in the industry we have grown up loving. 📺

Danielle "Sachant" Vanderlip is currently the Assistant Community Manager for Shadowbane for Wolfpack Studios a Ubi Soft Company. She is also the Co-Author of the Official Brady Games Strategy Guides for Shadowbane, Horizons and World of Warcraft.

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NEWS BITS

World of Warcraft Expansion Announced at BlizzCon

Entitled *The Burning Crusade*, *World of Warcraft's* first expansion was announced earlier this week at BlizzCon. In addition to raising the level cap to 70, players will be able to acquire flying mounts, learn a new crafting profession and explore a new continent. No release date has been announced, according to the official FAQ.

Gizmondo Execs Resign amid Mob Accusations

Gamasutra is reporting that the Managing Director of Gizmondo, Carl Freer, has resigned from the company amid financial irregularities, including his reimbursement to the company for over \$160,000 for consulting fees originally paid to his wife. Also resigning is Stefan Eriksson, a senior executive of

the company. Eriksson was recently fingered by a Swedish newspaper as a member of the Swedish mafia.

Two other employees resigned and are wanted by Swedish police.

SOE to Release Free MMOG

SOE President John Smedley has announced they'll be releasing a free MMOG in fall 2006. The revenue model casts aside subscriptions in favor of premium purchases, similar to the item databases and character profiles they have available in *EQ2* for an extra fee.

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