

INTRODUCTION

Contextualizing Player Two

NOW WE'RE KNITTING WITH POWER?

In the late 1980s the video game industry, and console gaming in particular, was primarily caught up with their mainstay audience—-young boys and men. While there were certainly girls and women who played video games at the time, this was not the primary target audience of the industry. The tacit assumption was that those who paid for and played console game systems were primarily male.

Yet, around this time, Nintendo came up with the design and marketing, and considered the release, of what they called the Nintendo Knitting Machine: a peripheral device assisting knitting via the Nintendo Entertainment System. The “game” was never released to wide audiences.¹ On August 29, 2012, Howard Phillips, a former Nintendo employee, posted a photo of the planned full--page advertisement for the peripheral to his Facebook Timeline photo album (Figure 1).² The advertisement had been meant to promote the device to toy companies and wholesale distributors at that time. The single--page image, featuring a photo of the peripheral, leads with the headline “now you’re knitting with power” and explains:

You’re looking at the Nintendo Knitting Machine.

It’s not a game; not a toy; not something a young girl can outgrow in three or six months or even a year.

It’s a machine that interacts with the powerful Nintendo Entertainment System to actually knit sweaters: and not just one or two patterns but a multitude of different and unique designs.

The Nintendo Knitting Machine is just one more example of the innovative thinking that keeps Nintendo on the cutting edge of video technology. And your customers at the edge of their seats.

Of course we should probably mention that no other video game system offers anything even remotely similar. But why needle the competition?

While the system was apparently demoed for corporations and at toy shows, it never was released to American audiences.³

But the advertisement—the best piece of evidence that the Nintendo Knitting Machine was once considered the “cutting edge” of gaming technology—raises several pertinent questions. First, for whom was this system meant? The advertisement mentions “girls,” but a more specific demographic (or whether the peripheral would also be marketed to knitting women) is ambiguous. Second, why did Nintendo feel the need to try to appeal to female audiences in the mid--1980s? No other serious attempts were being made to market console systems to women and girls at this time, and yet Nintendo clearly saw that this demographic might be viable enough to design not only software but an entire peripheral for them. Finally, and most important, it becomes necessary to ask, what happened to the Nintendo Knitting Machine? Why did it disappear, and why was it rejected as a model to get girls and women more interested in gaming?⁴

Beyond the video game industry, though, there are other compelling aspects to the advertisement from a media and cultural studies perspective. The headline of the advertisement suggests that the Nintendo Knitting Machine is a tool of empowerment. But in what way is the peripheral actually empowering? Rather than being a gateway for girls or women interested in gaming, the machine repurposes stereotypes of women in terms of their desire to engage with leisure and play.⁵ It allows for non--masculine play but manages that play, parsing it into specific forms of femininity. The Nintendo Knitting Machine suggests that domesticity and labor are the only possible entry points for females interested in engaging with the then rapidly changing and playful technologies of the video game industry. The advertisement leads off with a promise of empowerment, but there is nothing empowering about what is being offered. The suggestion that the peripheral—certainly not a game—would offer a perfect solution to the fickle tastes of young girls who would only have a fleeting interest in “games” or “toys” is a selling point of this technology.

The system suggests a condescending solution to the complex problem of leisure and diversification. It manages the potential of gender diversity by reaffirming common stereotypes about how women and girls are expected to play. And, yet, this absurd example, the Nintendo Knitting Machine, is not alone. While, in recent years, there is an increasing amount of diversity in terms of *whom* video games are being created for, those attempts reflect larger issues regarding gender and leisure, a topic explored at length in this book. At the same time, it is important to not dismiss the Nintendo Knitting Machine in terms of the desire it represents. Clearly certain members of the video game industry recognized and were attempting to respond to the hegemonic masculinity that so deeply guided the ethos of digital play. While the attempt itself was misguided—even comical—the fact that it existed shows promise that change was on the (very distant) horizon.

That change is upon us now. We are entering a new age of digital play—one marked by the sheer volume of games that are being heavily marketed to woman and girl audiences yet remains in flux. Many books have been dedicated to understanding the games that came out of what could be characterized as the first wave of digital games. The games in this era fall into several genres and categories (such as first-person shooters, platformers, fighting games, and role-playing games). This book in no way is meant to suggest that female audiences have no interest in these genres. There are well-documented moments that neatly illustrate that many of these games have been loved by a variety of people. Yet it is impossible to disentangle this early video game industry from the masculine forces that drove it.⁶ While women and girls indeed *played* these games, they have often been considered outliers, marginalized, pushing their way into a space not originally intended for them.

The second wave of video games can be characterized by a feminine ethos of leisure. This leisure is complicated and messy, and does not always look like play from every angle. It is often demeaned by the video game industry itself, treated as a lesser mode of digital play. And still, it is the harbinger of what is to come. The push and pull of gendered leisure practices are central to this new mode of gaming: like it or not, we are ready for the player I characterize as “Player Two.”

The complicated representation of gender and leisure via video games (discussed in detail throughout this book) is by no means surprising. Mass media has long had tumultuous relationships with women’s genres, framing women as consumptive of specific styles and themes while simultaneously mocking those very media objects designed for and marketed to them. For example, the romance—whether in film, television, or book form—is deliberately designed for and marketed to women.⁷ Yet, when women show interest or desire in the genre, often they are doing so despite a broad dismissal of the perceived cultural value of those media objects. Melodramas, “chick flicks,” romances, and soap operas all are held to be inferior to popular formats that are perceived as more masculine.

This trend has followed through to video games. In recent years, an increasing number of video games have been designed for women and subsequently advertised to them. Currently, females make up approximately 50 percent of the gaming public.⁸ Much like the Nintendo Knitting Machine, the games that are deliberately designed for women often repurpose genres, themes, stereotypes, and expectations of feminine styles of play. Additionally, similar to previous forms of media, games designed for women are often overlooked and dismissed as having no importance or value. Yet these games are important. The games discussed in this book are often small—in scope, in budget, and in narrative form—but they are full of meaning. They take on the work of helping us understand the larger issues at play in terms of gender and leisure practices in a more general sense, as well as the larger stories of how they are embedded within the video game industry as a whole.

By analyzing this new mode of feminized digital play, it becomes easier to reconcile the positive and negative baggage it carries. The themes and genres of gendered gaming are not arbitrary. They illustrate strange and compelling patterns and draw a very specific picture of what an idealized woman gamer might look like and how that woman should play. Within this, I am making a strong distinction between the real, lived experiences of women players as opposed to the perception of women players as they are constructed, designed, and managed by the video game industry. I refer to this as “designed identity.”

Designed identity is a by-product—an unintended consequence of the repurposing of women’s leisure practices into digital play, and the result of industrial forces that idealize specific (lucrative) audiences. Designed identity is a hybrid outcome of industry conventions, textual constructs, and audience placements in the design and structure of video games. It is not exclusive to women—and one can easily argue that the masculine gamer identity of the past is similarly a kind of designed identity. In her book *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*, Carly Kocurek deftly analyzes the construction of the male gamer identity, beginning in the 1970s through analysis of several forms of media. The games and media in this book, however, are almost exclusively intended for women and, in large part, reflect a tenuous relationship between women and leisure. By invoking the notion of designed identity, this book does not emphasize the rich body of literature in identity politics research. The “identities” in question are not real, lived identities, but rather constructed identities suggested within game design, advertising,

and narrative. Designed identity allows specific women to be a valid sales point for companies attempting to tap into this emerging demographic, but it also operates as a means of keeping that very demographic in stasis. An unchanging demographic has predictable consumer needs that are easy to satisfy.

The woman player I discuss throughout this book is not a real player so much as a theoretical player—a fictionalized construction of the video game industry. She is a ghost, a shadow. Much as with the theorized player of the Nintendo Knitting Machine, this theoretical woman player is trapped within the stereotypes of expectation. But she is also powerful. She illustrates the influence the consumer can have to reform and change a system that was not initially intended for her. This book explores the content of games and game design to provide a framework for understanding what designed identity tells us about our cultural expectations of women's leisure and relationship to technology. By invoking designed identity, I focus on ways the theoretical woman player is managed through but also plays with gaming technologies: through time, emotions, consumption, and bodies. Ultimately, my goal is not to draw a clearer picture of *actual* women gamers whose experiences and play styles are much broader than the technologies that are built for them, but rather to discuss the larger shifts within and around the video game industry that are both inviting in women audiences yet keeping them at bay.

WHO IS PLAYER TWO?

I refer to this mode of designed identity, this not--quite--real player, as Player Two. If Player One is the—also designed—white, cis-, heterosexual, young, abled, and middle--class male, then Player Two becomes his counterpart as a mode of designed identity. Just as Player One was designed and marketed, bought and sold in terms of a specific, approved identity, so is Player Two. The designed identity of Player Two, like Player One, is a fiction, an amalgamation of many hybridized images of who should play, how they should play, and what that play looks like. Player Two is a ghost, a nonexistent construction, but also one that is rapidly changing the market. On the one hand, the games made for Player Two appear to be limiting and limited—small in scope and absurd in meaning. When compared to the vast and operationally complex games designed for Player One (e.g., those in the *Fallout* or *Metal Gear Solid* series), it might be easy to overlook the importance and value of Player Two games such as *Hungry Babies Mania* or *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*. These games do not appear to be about life--and--death issues; they represent small stories with small outcomes. And yet these games are important.

Why are these games important? Because they are rapidly changing the video game industry. No matter how many dismissive news articles are written about the *FarmVille* franchise⁹ or free--to--play games, and no matter how many industry people ignore the growing popularity of hidden object games such as the *Mystery Case Files* series, their popularity continues to rise. Player Two and her games are inviting in new kinds of players that the industry had not previously served. And while there are still limitations placed on the industry--constructed woman player, that new player has the *potential* to become an important power in redefining what the video game industry looks like.

The book title *Ready Player Two* is meant as a conscious nod toward Ernest Cline's dystopian futuristic novel *Ready Player One*. *Ready Player One* submerges the reader into two worlds simultaneously: a bleak corporate--run real world full of poverty and a robust, all--encompassing game world. This dual--world system is not an unusual trope in science fiction. The story follows a young, white male, Wade, who is attempting to win a massive Easter egg hunt within the virtual world. The hunt's creator—the deceased billionaire James Halliday—has decided, à la Willy Wonka, to will control of the game world and his vast wealth to the winner of the game: the finder of this egg. Halliday is described as the child of a working--class, white family (his whiteness is never explicitly stated, but implied). The book details that “by all accounts, James was a bright boy, but socially inept. He had an extremely difficult time communicating with people around him. Despite his obvious intelligence, he did poorly in school, because most of his attention was focused on computers, comic books, sci--fi and fantasy novels, movies, and above all else, video games.”¹⁰ Because of Halliday's own obsession with geek culture from the 1980s, the players of the egg hunt have become obsessed with (and connoisseurs of) films, video games, television shows, and other cultural aspects of the 1980s. The 1980s is treated, as such, as a kind of golden age of gaming. And because the real world in the game—the corporate dystopia—is so bleak, the 1980s stands in contrast, idealized and glorified as a perfect point in history. Halliday is worshipped as a kind of god of this improbable version of the 1980s.

In turn, the novel unavoidably, and simultaneously, glorifies something else: the white masculinity that prevailed during the 1980s. Through constant references to films and sitcoms like *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Real Genius*, *Silver Spoons*; white male bands like Rush and Def Leppard; and male computer game programmers, we are reminded as to who “Player One” actually is, and has

long since been—a white, heterosexual, cis--gendered male. This point is further reinforced when our white male protagonist takes the lead within the competition, a game created by a white man. For sure, the book has strong characters that do not fit into the structural paradigm of glorifying white masculinity. However, like the 1980s media it venerates, the white, heterosexual, cis--gendered males are ultimately the characters that win the game. Yet it is also white males that run the corporate dystopia, suggesting that (perhaps) this rule of white masculinity is a double--edged sword.

In recent years, many have remarked on the privilege of the white geek male, in the popular press¹¹ and academic writing,¹² as well as specific ramifications of this persona on video game culture.¹³ There has long been a sense that this character—the misunderstood white geek male—was an underdog who would use his smarts to gain access to and ultimately reign triumphant against the perceived bullies of his youth. Recent criticisms of this character, though, highlight how the geeky white male perpetuates similar kinds of sexist, heterosexist, and racist undercurrents. This white geeky guy has been idealized (and monetized) in popular culture to the extent that he is now the focal market for the primary video game industry—the console and PC gamer. Culturally and capitalistically, he is Player One.

But there are other players rapidly emerging within the video game market. *Ready Player Two* is meant, in part, as a response to the idealized 1980s youthful white male gamer, as glorified in the designed identity integral to *Ready Player One*. If the novelized version of Player One leads to a dystopian, exclusive society trapped in a classist system, wherein the only release is a game world that glorifies the culture of the (admittedly complicated) 1980s, then Player Two gets to hit the reset button. We are moving beyond the traditional depictions of the popular gamer. Player One no longer gets to define what games and gaming culture look like. We are entering a new phase wherein Player Two, the player highlighted throughout this book, has a distinct voice. And this voice is exactly why these games are so very significant.