Select Your Player:

Stereotype Interplay in Video Game
Commercial Advertising
from
Japan and the United States

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Introduction

The participation of women in the video game industry, has developed on all fronts over the past few decades. Within the community, women are participating and directing teams of programmers while hard coding video game engines. Out in the market, they are surpassing men on electronic related consumption[1], and women of all ages participate in different areas of the community.

My interest is in how joining video game studies, critical commercial analysis, and a feminist perspective can give clues on how the industry and community sees women as video game players. Through a form of visual persuasion of my own, I hope to raise new questions regarding both the representation of women in commercials in general, and to bring more culture credibility to the idea that women are video game players.

Literature Review

Readings are separated into two themes:

a) Advertising history and gender/race/global issues in advertising, and
b) Character and Player Identity relationships.

Advertising and Societies: Global Issues, by **Katherine Toland Frith and Barbara Mueller**, present common issues that deal with advertising that develops out of the increased internationalization of the advertisement industry. Some of the information provided includes a primer on Japan's advertising regulations, and notes that Japan is second after the United States in total advertising expenditures. (Pg. 90) Thus the reasons to compare Japanese and US video games becomes all the more enticing: the volume of commercials can give a greater perspective on the evaluation of the cultures, both countries have contributed directly to the video game market, and the same games are presented in commercials, allowing for cross-cultural comparisons. "Representations of the Other", or the use of "minorities" in commercials that go

1 Electronic Software Association. http://www.theesa.com

international, also provides a perspective that I wish to emphasize in any future research project related to this one. Additional chapters included "Children as Consumers", "Advertising and Gender Representation", though the material is limited to print media advertising.

Sheri Graner Ray, has a lot of information to contribute relating to category c, where she refers to the *Pyramid of Power,* where male players have no problem taking on female avatars, but females may experience discomfort playing a male avatar from a sociological phenomenon. She also makes a point to note:

"people are not only comfortable in their own strata, but they are also comfortable functioning in levels below their own and do not have a problem with stepping 'down' to fill a role that is beneath them in the pyramid. However, if people are called to function at a level above them in the pyramid, their comfort level decreases. This is because they are not familiar with the societal rules and taboos associated with the positions above their own." (Pg. 97)

Though important in its own right, I argue along the same patterns, that women are finding discomfort in adopting female avatars, since these same characters are adopted by men, whose vision/image of any given character are more predominant in advertising and commercial conventions, whereas women's imagery of characters develop more easily in fan communities, since it isn't addressed in advertising. The pyramid of power may explain why male players are shown imitating/playing with female game characters in the US, more than women. There are some commercials in Japan featuring the same kind of situations, but imitating/taking on roles of male characters, a distinct difference from the pyramid of power format.

This is related to **Laura Mulvey**'s concept of the "Male Gaze": How men look at women, and women look at themselves and other women, is not only limited to representations of players, but also the design of women characters (in both the actual game content, and the advertising that follows).

Methodology

Around the month of August in 2004, I was directed to a website collection featuring video game commercials from around the world. In the beginning, I had wanted to compare commercials on a global scale, as it was suggested that many of the same themes of sexism and power relationships currently in developed countries, are finding their way into developing countries. (Frith, pg. 235). But with the limitations of time and the various archives at hand, the two groups with the greatest collection within the archives were from Japan and the United States.

At roughly 900 commercials for each country at the time I had last visited the archive (previously www.majkel.mds.pl/html/reklama/indexENG.html), http://gameads.gamepressure.com featured commercials from personal contributions from visitors to the site, and commercials gathered from other specialized on–line archives.

Observed nearly 500 commercials on random, then expanded upon related commercials belonging to campaign groups to check for patterns. Again, commercials were sorted again for usability in documentary

Commercial Demographics Report

Origin of Commercial	*#F Players*	*#F Spectators*	*#M Players*	*# Male Specators*
Summary for 'countryOfOriginOfGame' = (47 detail records)				
Sum	5	0	14	1
Avg	0.106382978723404	0	0.297872340425532	0.0212765957446809
Min	0	0	0	0
Max	5	0	4	1
America				
Summary for 'countryOfOriginOfGame' = America (67 detail records)				
Sum	16	7	88	37
Avg	0.238805970149254	0.104477611940299	1.3134328358209	0.552238805970149
Min	0	0	0	0
Max	3	4	13	13
Europe				
Summary for 'countryOfOriginOfGame' = Europe (7 detail records)				
Sum	2	2	3	1
Avg	0.285714285714286	0.285714285714286	0.428571428571429	0.142857142857143
Min	0	0	0	0
Max	1	2	1	1
Japan				
Summary for 'countryOfOriginOfGame' = Japan (103 detail records)				
Sum	41	5	85	18
Avg	0.398058252427184	0.0485436893203883	0.825242718446602	0.174757281553398
Min	0	0	0	0
Max	8	2	8	8
Grand Total	64	14	190	57

segment of project. End result is N=Number of commercials, N=224 commercials total.

The commercials came in varied file formats, so conversions were made with both open source software and third–party software; at the time, the most critical software was EO video, a movie/wav converter. This allowed me to convert and edit WMVs in Final Cut Pro on a Mac OSX machine. Final Cut Pro and LiveType were used to edit commercial segments and add title sequences to project.

Before the commercials were edited, the selection process depended on two factors: presence of women in relationship to era of commercial, and presence of women in relationship to country of origin of the commercial. Additional images featured paper advertisements for graphic cards, but characters also featured in animated demonstrations.

Documentary was designed in particular stages: still–image storyboarding, where images were grouped together by themes regardless of time/country of origin. Subsequent revisions developed storyboard with finer categorization. In addition, a database was compiled, featuring information gathered on each viewed commercial, including number of players (based on sex), the presence of game characters (vs. actual game footage), or any specific characteristics unique to commercial, and total duration of useful footage in any given commercial.

The storyboard and the summary information given by the database, gave a preliminary estimate of commercial length (20 minutes, 13 seconds), minus transitions, titles, speed alterations). This set up the background for the clip organization phase, where commercials were placed and cropped accordingly in FCP. The final version of the project runs 13 minutes, 23 seconds.

Useful Terminology

Gamer –	A person who plays video games/computer games
Actresses/Actors –	People used to represent game characters, or illustrate a particular mechanic of the game
Players –	People who hold controllers, or assume character roles in commercials like actors, represent players taking on character's role.

Actors/Actresses vs. Players: An actress may dress up as a game character, as can a player. Actresses are actually intended to take on the game character's role, or represent the character directly (They 'are' their characters). Players may either simply hold controllers, or role–play as a character (They are themselves, playing as characters).

Audio Transcript of Material

The video game community has grown over the past 30 years reflecting the global diversity of its players and the advancement of technology itself.

And with women claiming more than half of the ninety–six billion dollars worth of electronics bought last year, the video game industry can only benefit by changing the image of women in advertising.[i]

But has the image of the video game player really changed since the days of Pong?

Due to their very nature, video games allow players to adopt new roles, men and women take on new identities with each different game they choose to play.

However, marketing strategies are using gender exclusive themes of role play when depicting the “game player's experience”.

Evoking images of Shakespeare's Globe Theater, males are invited to play as both male and female characters.

And as for women? Well, sometimes we're the actresses, and sometimes we're the player, and sometimes we're the props. On bad days its kinda hard to tell the difference between the three.

But by observing game commercials from Japan, we see images that are both eerily familiar, and brand new. Through them, we can find the female in the video game player.

[Title] Select Your Player

[Audio] Announcer: Nothing comes between a man and his game.

[Title] Between a Man

Boys are credited with the revival of the video game industry in the US. After the video game market collapse of 1983, the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1986, was followed soon after by a flood of images. Of boys playing video games. Either alone, or with friends, or with family....

But these same boys have grown into men since then, as the average age of the gamer is now clocking in at 29 years.[ii]

So when advertisers started to consider that their main target audience

would have to deal with puberty like everyone else, women reappeared in video game advertising as well.

We came back as the Lara Crofts. We were the disenchanted girlfriends. Befuddled lovers. And the wives left in the dust for... the good things in life.

But when women are left behind for the “more important things in life”, advertisers lose the opportunity to show that women can be co–players in their relationships. Or, show that women can choose to play games under their own terms.

So is it surprising that more women and girls were shown as players in the early 80s..?

At the height of the Atari–Era of video games, the entire family was invited to play. Including daughters. Mothers. And Grandmothers.

Though these images are tied with traditional gender roles, they also tried to show that games could have a multi–generational appeal. Such images would never be seen again for nearly 20 years.

[Title] “It's good to play together.”

The video game industry has become thoroughly established into mainstream culture. And with nearly 90% of households[iii] with children having either rent or bought video games, relationships between players and their family... have been at times... a love... hate relationship.

With the advent of on–line gaming, marketers appealed to the fact that one could play with people from across the globe. Even other female gamers. But in this context, it doesn't really address the local female gamer.

Advertising has hyped man's fascination with video games, depicting male players as obsessed with games to the point of abandoning real life relationships.

On a simple click of the mouse, men can retreat into a world populated by fellow game players from across the globe.

And 'unlike' real life, emotional ties to other players can be expressed more freely.

And of course, when the unexpected happens, on–line gaming keeps you connected with family.

There is more than enough evidence to suggest that women love to play video games as much as men do.[iv]

But when women aren't competing with the idea of video game playing as a male–only activity, they're competing with the female video game characters.

[Title] The Digital Actress

[Audio] Incredible Detail. Incredible. Incredible. Incredible detail.

[Audio] Well, I only play for the fighting. I appreciate the expansive multi–tier environments... And the sixteen characters... th–the pixel shaded bump–mapping. And, the rich plot development! Seriously, why else would I play it?

Indeed. Games have come a long way in developing “graphic processing capabilities”, and the plots have *never* been more engaging. But C'mon!

Sometimes characters have been depicted by actors or actresses, in order to... evoke emotions not present in the actual game footage.

Nowadays, commercials have developed enough to breathe life into characters outside of their own game.

Ulala from Space Channel 5 lets women know what sanitary napkins she uses to keep on dancing worry free.

Coca–cola borrows the themes of wonder and magic found in Final Fantasy 9.

In US commercials though, female characters are selling their sex–appeal, rather than marketing any particular product beyond themselves.

The main character from the digital Final Fantasy movie, Aki Ross, was the first digitized character to pose in Maxim. Rayne of Bloodrayne fame, has up–ed the ante by being the first digital model to go topless.

The use of digital female characters is not only limited to the video game industry. But it is closely tied to a key computer gaming market – graphics cards.

Developed through company demos, these characters show the capabilities of the card without resorting to too many difficult words. Aliens and ogres have also used just as often, but not with quite the same

choice of 'features' to emphasize.

[Title] Playing with Roles

Some commercials have acknowledged that players and characters are not always of the same sex or, even of the same orientation.

When the Sims first came out, many of the themes featured sexual innuendo played out by the 'sims', and featured one of the key mechanics of the game, the floating green gem representing the “active” sim controlled by a player.

The second series of commercials, built upon this theme, by recognizing that both players and characters needed to be addressed. The idea that characters were self-defined by players rather than preordained, lead to a marketing campaign featuring player-character relationships. Breaking gender/character associations left and right... or sometimes reflecting them.

Some stereotypes managed to sneak their way in...
But in their own way, these commercials are gems in their own right.

[Something Borrowed, Something New]

Like the US commercials of yester-year, the strategy of making games appealing to multiple generations, single gender groups, and mixed gender groups, promote a family-type appeal to games that has yet to be adopted here [lost audio: again].

Not [uncut audio: just] limited to taking turns, bring their... 'traditional skills', and apply them to play.

They're just as often shown playing with the actual system in hand.

More, 'real-to-life' depictions of the female video game player, mirror those of [uncut audio: how] male players.

This is one of the few times that a game experience is depicted by a female game player, and only through a female gamer's perspective.

Perhaps the myth persists that women don't play video games, is that advertising never shows women playing games on their own terms.

They don't show women playing with co-workers. They don't show women playing with their partners, they don't show mothers playing with the rest of the family. They don't show images of women playing with

other women. And they don't show women playing games on their own.

But with new innovations in gaming interfaces, and the emergence of girls and women into more active roles... *and* in real life... the gaming community is changing. Women and girls are challenging the way characters are represented, adapting them under their own values. There is hope yet for advertisers, and even the game community itself, to better acknowledge both halves of the community that supports it.

Documentary Commentary

[Introduction Segment]

Images are from members of http://sxc.hu/index.phtml.

All music credited to Jari Ylamaki:
http://www.indietalk.com/showthread.php?s=2160a770810c89991c3c20e5a52449b7&t=6272
http://www.mp3.com.au/artist.asp?id=3001

Several difficulties with audio, much of the speaking audio had to be broken apart throughout the entire project, and volume levels need readjustment.

[Atari–Era Segment – Between a Man]

(Interesting use of the NES game pad.)

Originally, I had planned to also make comment on the racial homogeneity of commercials throughout the documentary, but both poor audio recording and overall project constraints meant such references were left out. However, both African American and Japanese American gamers are presented in US commercials, though the relationships between players are varied. Most of the presentations of non–Caucasian gamers were quickly shot, exaggerated.

One particular clip that I wish I could have kept, was featured in gg_mickey_j.mpg, featuring a young Caucasian–American (who is shown earlier in the documentary, receiving a Game Gear from a Caucasian girl) looking over the shoulders of a young African–American playing with the Game Gear, and exaggeratively pointing at the screen during play. Whether this is a form of directed play or not, this is likely a form of tokenism as described by Katherine Toland Frith and Barbara Mueller[2]. There is a question of who is in control in such a situation: the boy who is holding the console, or the one who is commenting (even if positively) on play? This is a good contrast to one of the ideas I have presented within the documentary, on why there are few images of women depicted as 'holding' the controller.

[“It's good to play together.” Segment]

Though a commercial originating from the United States, the couple is presumably speaking Italian, (or a derivative of a similar romance language). There are multiple stereotypes at play here: The first one is the use of this household. Is it an image that tries to change the definition of a US household, or reinforces some other image? In her work, Desai described a colleague's revelation where by defying stereotypes in identifying oneself as American, the definition of “American” would invariably change as well. However, the ambiguity of the setting makes it difficult to place. The lack of English in a commercial does not mean the household depicted is a 'foreign' one.

[Cossacks.com Segment]

Small goof – I wished to add 1–2 more seconds to clip, depicting the “The

2 Advertising and Societies: Global Issues. 2003. (p. 120)

Art of War” text that would have followed, and juxtapose it with my “retreat” commentary.

[4 Brothers Segment]

Too much audio was removed due to poor recording takes.

[When women aren't competing...]

Overextended clip asking about playing favorite xbox games, wanted earlier visual extended.

[Evoke emotions]

Better 'takes', but audio quality was poor. Both Metroid commercials are put from Japan at this point.

[Graphics Card Characters]

Audio overextends into next title.
Dawn, Dusk, and Nalu images from
http://www.nzone.com/object/nzone_nalu_home.htm

Ads scanned from Computer Source Magazine, May 2005.

[Sims Part 1]

Variety of sims is limited under one demographic in particular – race. Only in the second part of commercials is a black female player presented, visually replaced soon after by a white female player using a 'death' character. Again, very evocative of the issues of presence and

power relationships. The avatars used to represent characters are white, with the exception of boyfriend/girlfriend's characters featuring a thief and a cop.

Final segment, features 2–3 male video game players in background to male interacting with male character over a pizza slice.

[Something Borrowed, Something New Segment]

Looking back on this collection of clips, only when everything is said and done that the majority of clips were around the Nintendo brand, with some exceptions of Playstation. Sega Game Gear,

[Traditional Skills]

Wasn't sure what tone to use in this segment. There is the stereotype of the mother's domain in the kitchen, but at the same time the commercial is parodying it – The volume of green onions chopped, and whether she was preparing for a meal in particular, or preparing for the game itself is unclear.

[Mirror those of Male players]

Bad audio edit. – Originally, “Japanese women's experiences in playing games in commercials, mirror those of male players of Japan and male players in US.

[Final Sequence]

If I had the research experience (and time), I would have included fan–art creations made by female artists, or cosplay (costume play) of women dressing as female game characters. But this would tie in with

physical advertising, through comparing cosplayers with 'booth babes' (women provocatively dressed to encourage attendance and influence convention floor traffic). It would also bring up issues of copyright infringement, something I don't want to bring upon members of the community.

(Women Studies. I had meant to type Women Studies, not Women's Studies.)

Conclusion

A generalization of the data does suggest that there is a greater presence of women players in Japanese commercials than in US commercials (41/85 ratio of female/male players vs. 16/88). While compiling the documentary however, a pattern of themes associated with particular systems arose: family with Nintendo (Japan) and Atari (US – 80s). If I could revise my project, I would bring more consideration to that element of the gathered data. I would also further examine the impact of globalization on racial and gendered presence within commercials, due to moments where players presented subtly altered racial stereotypes. But otherwise I feel that the overall message regarding women's presence in video game commercials has been addressed. It is clear that there is a difference overall in how women are presented as players and characters in commercials, and whether this is a symptom of the games being advertised, or derived from marketing campaign design, needs to be examined.

Resources

Graphic card advertisement scans:

Computer Source Magazine, May 2005.

Aki Ross image:

http://www.allmoviephoto.com/photo/2001_Final_Fantasy:_The_Spirits_Within_photo2.html

Bloodrayne image:

www.rubbermag.com/ news/imgs/050404_maj.jpg

Music:

Jari Ylamaki

Stock Images:

http://www.sxc.hu/

Commercials:

http://gameads.gamepressure.com

Research Materials

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i Around 55 billion dollars, according to the Consumer Electronics Association 2004 report.
http://www.ce.org/publications/books_references/digital_america/default.asp
http://www.keloland.com/NewsDetail2817.cfm?Id=22,32267

ii Essential Facts About Games and Youth Violence. Electronic Software Association, 2003.
www.theesa.com/files/EF-GamVio.pdf
http://www.wildtangent.com/default.asp?pageID=solutions_1

iii http://www.theesa.com/archives/2005/03/third_party_vie_1.php
http://www.theesa.com/archives/2004/05/esa_releases_re.php

iv http://www.theesa.com/facts/gamer_data.php