

The Seventh Annual Game Design Think Tank

Project Horseshoe 2012



Group Report: Opening the Kimono

Participants:

As this topic is sensitive, some group members have chosen to remain anonymous.

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'Quick Draw'

'Dream Catcher'

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A brief statement of the problem on which the group worked

Many people desire to have a romantic fantasy. However, males and females have different expectations for such an experience. This disconnect can make designing a single shared experience to satisfy the expectations of both sexes challenging.

A brief statement of the group's solution to this problem

In order to design a game experience that appeals to both men and women, it is important to pointedly design different experiences. Our group created a framework based on observations made during an informal focus group to try to interpret the needs of each gender.

To experienced designers, this report generates compelling evidence that separate "male and female" experience designs are necessary. We used ourselves (2 men, 2 women) as a focus group. Both male and female experienced designers in our focus group made multiple incorrect assumptions regarding the wants and needs of the opposite sex. We were routinely surprised at the "true" wants and needs of the audience, regardless of our experience and intuition as game designers.

Expanded problem statement

The problem statement focuses on the lack of games that both males and females can enjoy together synchronously. Although there are a few, like Second Life, that enjoy an almost split gender ratio, 42% female and 58% male respectively, they offer in game features that allow players to engage in various acts of sex, even though the majority of female players have reported in a survey that they rarely if ever had sex or seek out sexual encounters with a male partner, a resounding 74%.

During topic discussion the group agreed that often couples engage in games that tend to be more like "work" rather than a fun time for both. For the female, to spend quality time with her mate, she may stand by and watch while the male engages in a satisfying experience with the game he has chosen and visa versa in regards to asynchronous casual games designed specifically with women in mind.

Our group members consisted of two women and two men and so we decided to use ourselves as guinea

pigs, as experienced designers, to explore the differences between the genders at a micro level. In this way, we could then examine if it's possible to engineer the framework of an experience that invites both genders to partake and enjoy or if the differences were just too vast.

We decided we would start out creating a framework around the different parts required to create an online synchronous experience and from there discuss what specific features would be required to keep each gender interested. After going through the framework, we would then discuss how biological and psychological behaviors could be playing into this decision. This could serve as a compass in thinking about how to scale this framework into a prototype with a larger player base in order to draw more conclusive data.

References:

<http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2010/10/second-life-sex-for-women.html>

<http://www.kzero.co.uk/blog/therecom-vs-second-life-demographics/>

Expanded solution description:

Game Overview

Given the informal focus group data from our workgroup, we propose a design framework for a "Virtual Bodice Ripper," a living romance novel meant to be a shared, virtual fantasy product that leads to satisfying intimacy. In other words, it is a form of structured or unstructured role playing within a fantasy setting for the purpose of arousal or intimacy. Our team has agreed the basic experience would be an online experience for two live players (1 male, 1 female).

Settings

What Fantasy settings does each gender find arousing?

We observed that women prefer settings with open-ended, romantic associations, and men prefer specific and to-the-point scenarios.

Female preferences	Male preferences
• feudal Japan • cafe in Paris • Victorian era	• strangers on a train • strangers on a plane • hiking trip

Scientific Evidence: In our ancient past men had to develop visual movement skills to better hunt down prey. This could account for their emphasis on choosing a mate. Women had to maintain relationships to stay included in a tribe to survive threats when men were out hunting, sometimes for days. These factors could be the reason why the men focused on specific places with details around the encounter vs the women who choose locations that encompassed a general feel of emotion vs a specific encounter.

It is also important to note that brain scans have found that a homosexual man's brain looks very similar to a human heterosexual female, and while some of the scenarios below may be comparable to a same sex couple, this should be an edge case that is given more weight.

Experience Structure

We found that females want the option of an ongoing partner in the context of a campaign, while men prefer single encounters. We agreed the difference was analogous to the contrast between 'act' vs. 'scene',

or between 'war' vs. 'battle'.

Female preferences	Male preferences
• option of a campaign with one partner • either campaign or encounter, with the option of repeat partners • partners should be anonymous	• an encounter, not a campaign • a campaign, but with different partners • option of non-anonymous (e.g. friend invite - only; females send invitations?)

Males and females agree participants should be able to leave at any time, but also they agree the design should provide for graceful exits. For example, one graceful approach was for a male that chooses to leave, would be to have an NPC take over or have the scenario sunset with a "Barney Stinson"-style ending from the TV series in "How I Met Your Mother".

Scientific Evidence: Oxytocin is often referred to as the "bonding or cuddling" chemical. Both men and women produce it, but it's triggered in different ways for each. Women produce it through touch and communication with a partner. Men produce it through sexual activity. Therefore, campaigns may be preferable to females due to the increased chance of conversation and interaction. For men, encounters are preferable because of an increased chance of sex with one to engage bonding.

Matchmaking

We discussed a variety of matchmaking schemes:

- Inviting from a friends list (usernames would be required)
- Roleplay lobby to meet potential partners
- Pre-set "random" matching categories based on ratings (game figures this out for you - sort of like match.com criteria)
 - Populate these matches to recruit from 3D space
- The woman can offer her "card" at the end, and he can add her to his friends list for future encounters. She gets his information as well.

Female preferences	Male preferences
Preference to screen a partner before intimate contact.	Want to be able to invite repeat partners... ... or be matched with anonymous partners.

Scientific Evidence: Men typically have more body mass than women and therefore this may lead to women being much more cautious about who they choose to interact with up close and personal. Men on the other hand want as many encounters as possible to improve chances of finding a mate.

System

How does this work?

Men want the couple to affect the outcome on the basis of improvisation; women prefer a structured narrative with scripted outcomes. Women expressed that it's very easy for a man to ruin the experience for a woman by saying or doing the wrong thing.

Female preferences	Male preferences
• want the narrative to ensure a desirable outcome	• want to be more freeform experience • make choices in the narrative. • more macro and micro level choice

- more responsibility for the outcome
- “It’s ‘about the jazz’ between two people.”

Character

How should we create & select characters?

Men want quick preset characters and appearance options, while women want customization options for both themselves and their partner. Both sexes want the option to express what they want in a partner.

Males are satisfied with a familiar archetype, and they find the appearance of their avatar irrelevant. For Females, it is much more like character generation in the RPG. They look for lots of customization options for characters, such as hairstyles or even a potential backstory for character archetypes.

Most significantly, we found that women would like the option for men to pick the outfit they would wear or potentially the way they look. Men do not need to pick what the female looks like. However, they felt to would be fine to have a general selection of “their type(s)”. For example, blonde, redhead, Asian.

Female preferences	Male preferences
• want customization options for characters • want men to participate	• want preset archetypes • did not require too much input into the looks of their partner

Scientific Evidence: Younger women tend to fixate on decoration and plumage in which to attract a mate. They typically focus on alpha male characteristics, such as broad shoulders, height, deep voices and more aggressive behavior, all of which suggest virility and the ability to produce strong offspring. As a female gets older, her preferences tend to shift towards finding a mate that will guard children and “stay in the nest”, so finding out if a male can provide and is attentive to the female becomes very important. Men throughout their life look for visual triggers of a healthy, fertile female, shiny hair, large hip to waist ratio and high voices. Therefore visual aids in a virtual environment become very important to women as well as the ability to vet men to find suitable partners for a romantic encounter that “feels” as if it could lead to something more long term.

Communication

As we took a look at the lead up to the scenario, the group considered types of communication and interaction that could take place before, during and after the scenario.

Males and females have different concerns/perspectives that they associate to the initial meeting with their partners.

Female preferences	Male preferences
• freeform choice [one vote] • engineered choice [one vote]	• structured narrative dialogue trees, or... • ... engineered parser dialog (prevents the person from saying things badly and keeps them in the mode)... • ... OR open roleplay mode (freeform chat).

As we took a look at the lead up to the scenario, the group considered types of communication and interaction that could take place before, during and after the scenario.

Males prefer initial communication that was constructed via narrative dialogue trees, engineers parsers/canned chats to prevent comments from breaking the mood/character/fantasy. Males also are open to a freeform open roleplay mode for communication.

Females require a warming up period that would ensure safety and comfort with their partner. This was a critical component of the initial interactions. For these initial communications, females prefer an offering of one freeform choice and one engineers/canned chat choice.

Once a prospective partner are brought into her circle, the Female would be open to the same forms of communications that the male had identified.

During the scenario, these standard mechanisms for communication seemed fitting, but there was some particular expression relating to some interesting mechanisms that could apply to help build the mood as well as create better feedback loops between partners.

Psychologist James Borg estimates that only about 7% of communication is the words we use themselves. This means that special emphasis is needed to account for the non verbal components of a system like this.

We reviewed the idea of a mutually employed mechanism that could indicate that the selection/response /choice or freeform action was moving a partner in a “hotter” or “colder” direction. This feedback would be displayed in real-time informing the present actions/choices that could be made to arbitrarily extend or press the intensity of the experience.

Additionally, the use of emotes or other physical expressions of satisfaction or concern could be used as well. For example, a partner could enhance the emotional content of their communication through the use of blushing or grinning.

Intimate Scenario

What are the interaction possibilities?

When it comes to the moment of intimacy, women want to see high-quality pre-rendered romantic scenes while men prefer a “fade to black” with a good narrative closure.

Female preferences	Male preferences
• High-quality animated interactions (kissing, compromising positions, no nudity) • Story elements? Pre-rendered romantic scenes. This is not “down and dirty” porn, it’s about romantic interaction. FFX love scene. We want love scenes, not sex scenes. The fantasy of a budding relationship. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JQwhsh5nv8	• No screen-rendered sex. No pre-rendered sex. • “Fade to black” - uncanny valley • Want to see a sleeping lady after and the guy does a victory lap. Want to see “a sense of the theater curtain dropping.” Fireworks, marching band, victory lap, congratulations, etc.

Taking the interaction discussion beyond this core, there exist an interesting set of potential interaction types that keep their distance from pornography, but represent some cerebrally focused, freeform choice to

provide more of a performance opportunity for advanced players.

Scientific Evidence: Men have 2 ½ x more brain space devoted to sexual drive, as well as larger processors in the amygdala, which is the center for sexy action and aggression. In addition, a man's testosterone, the primary hormone responsible for sexual drive, maintains throughout his life and only starts to recede slowly at a later age. This coupled with being wired to looking for visual stimuli may be why men prefer a fade to black scenario implying sex, unless the scene can be very life like in rendering. On the other hand, women get a chemical high through communication, having an 11% neurons in the areas for hearing and language. This could be why they prefer to draw out the romantic interlude portion of the fantasy that could, but does not always lead up to actual intercourse.

Reward System

Men want to be rewarded with performance or category ratings by their female partner, and women prefer to be rewarded with in-game gifts.

Female preferences	Male preferences
• Do not want to be rated. Instead, want gifts from the men (pick from a registry) • Men could be given money based on their rating to buy these gifts - perhaps women would only be able to earn items/money as rewards.	• Want to be rewarded with score / rating and work to become a desirable partner. This could be a potential "ribbon system" (like in League of Legends) where men earned ratings in categories like "romantic" or "attentive," etc. • Visual display of prowess (peacocking) = special clothing, etc. for high ratings.

Scientific evidence: The male brain has larger centers for aggression and competition. In primates and other animals, males compete through aggressive means to win a female. In human males, climbing the social hierarchy through competition could be important when looking to attract a suitable female. Women have more neurons dedicated towards emotional body language cues, such as virtual tokens offered by male characters, which may mean a potential mate is looking to consider them a suitable partner.

Items from the brainstorming lists that the group thought were worth reporting

Background: How our group of 2 men and 2 women indirectly came to this topic

We began with the topic of "Games for Everyone," but it turned out everyone in our group had a different definition of the goal for this topic. The female and male group members seemed to particularly have a disconnect in their idea of goals; the two female members seemed to be in agreement about much of the direction (even as it evolved). Their initial goal was to "deconstruct" games with a wide audience (Angry Birds, Plants versus Zombies, The Sims franchise, etc), to create a list of common list of mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics seen in "for everyone" or "purple" games.

The male group members seemed to interpret this as a topic that would not provide a lot of insight or

learning or as common product / demographic marketing practices, so the deconstruction exercise was never performed.

A new topic was presented: "How to create a game that both men and women enjoy without pandering to women and without alienating men." This became the basis for our group direction. Very few games have been developed to pointedly target both men and women in a context they each find compelling, however, it is a relatively common practice for dating sims. Dating Sims typically develop **separate experiences** for men and women, despite both participating in the same basic scenario. This is a distinctly uncommon practice in game development outside of this genre.

This led into a discussion about the 2004 Project Horseshoe topic about "a game as a first date," and then about the female interest in Fifty Shades of Grey, Twilight, and romance novels. As the group began to discuss the separate male and female interests (turn-ons) and approach in regards to romantic situations (particularly related to entertainment), the "Virtual Bodice Ripper" game concept developed organically.

Other reference material:

[http://wiki.igda.org/Sex in Games SIG](http://wiki.igda.org/Sex_in_Games_SIG)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body_language)

Science Snippets

Male have a 2.5x greater sex drive. Men's testosterone very high at puberty and recedes like a glacier over time. Drives men to concentrate on sex, achievement and hierarchy.

Did a psychology test with a picture of a man and a woman talking (20 men, 20 women). All men's brains lit up for sex. No women's brains did.

Men think about sex 7-8 times a day. Women think about sex maybe 1 time. Women have 11% more neurons for language and hearing.

Principal area for memory and emotion (hippocampus) is larger in women. Estrogen prompts the seeking of social communication and is a calming hormone.