

**LICENSE TO PLAY:**  
**WOMEN, PRODUCTIVITY, AND VIDEO GAMES**

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## ABSTRACT

Until only recently, video games were often understood to be created by, and for, masculine audiences (Fron et al, 2007; Ray, 2004; Cassell & Jenkins, 1999). Now, in the past few years, an influx of video games has been increasingly marketed to a demographic previously ignored by the gaming industry: adult females. These video games and their marketing help shed light on larger issues of gender, play, and productivity. In this dissertation, I analyze a complicated relationship between play and productivity in the design and advertising of video games aimed at women audiences and show how gendered modes of play are constructed and ideologically driven.

While the topic of ‘play’ may seem to be frivolous, I argue that play, particularly play designed for women, is of the utmost importance. To illustrate this I examine gendered divisions of play (and the construction of the player) in our culture. These divisions help to form specific *kinds* of players and reinforce gendered hierarchies, both in the video game industry (where femininity is often devalued) and in the cultural constructions of what is considered acceptable play for women. Through describing and analyzing the relationship between gender, play, and productivity, I show how ideologically driven practices of productive play help to reinforce traditional stereotypes of femininity, potentially affecting women’s leisure and play practices.

In order to do this, I discuss three kinds of productive play that are prominent in many women’s video games: pragmatic play, simulated productive play, and socially

productive play. *Pragmatic play*, as I show, is play that attempts to be productive for the player in the real world. For example, games such as *Brain Age* and *Wii Fit* use themes of self-help and self-care (in both game design and advertising) to attract feminine audiences. *Simulated productive play* is play that emulates real-world productivity—often in very mundane and domestic ways—and has the player re-enact these practices in the game world. Games such as *Diner Dash* and *Cooking Mama* provide examples of this simulated everyday domesticity. Finally, *socially productive play* refers to games that use stereotypes of family and caregiving to specifically attract women audiences. Video game systems such as the Nintendo Wii, in particular, use socially productive play to evoke guilt and expectations that women's play should center on taking care of the family. Productive play, in general, can function as a kind of permission slip, constructing excuses for why and when women are permitted to engage in specific forms of play. While none of the categories of play I identify are mutually exclusive, they all help to draw a clearer picture of how women's video game play has become essentializing and often encourages non-playful gender stereotypes.