

**Going with the Flo: Gender, Play, & Work in Diner Dash
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Abstract

This essay analyzes the video games in the popular Diner Dash franchise, paying specific attention to the games’ protagonist Flo. While on its surface, the series appears to be a simple game about a waitress, the game reflects more complex themes about gender, domesticity, work, and play. Ultimately, I argue, the game’s intertextuality alludes to an ambivalence that many women have towards these issues. By analyzing both game play and game narrative I focus primarily on the game’s conflation of work and play, its use of domestic themes, and issues of both empowerment and self-denial. All of these issues coexist simultaneously within the Dash games, creating a rich potential for media studies analysis.

Introduction

When most people think of video games, they do not think of waitressing. For many, video games evoke images of first person shooters, car racing, and unrealistically buxom heroines such as Lara Croft. These depictions, while not entirely untrue, represent the output of a masculine gaming industry that dominated the medium in the late 1980s and through the 1990s. In recent years, though, this medium and the industry behind it has begun to shift, allowing more voices and seeking larger audiences—often being more inclusive to women (Fron et al 2007b). In turn, more feminine games have become recently popular, including the Diner Dash game franchise. In Diner Dash, the player takes on the role of Flo, a young restaurateur. As Flo, the player seats and waits on customers, primarily working as a waitress.

On its surface, Diner Dash appears to be a fairly simple game with straightforward mechanics and little narrative, although this is a misleading image. Actions performed in the game, guidance from Flo, and game narratives send ambiguous messages about women’s work practices as well as women’s leisure practices. Additionally, the narrative minimalism allows it to be open to a broad spectrum of analyses. Being a game (and technically a leisure practice itself) makes analyses and interpretations even more complex, though also more compelling. More than just a game about waitressing, Diner Dash reenacts a complex relationship that many women have with work, leisure, domesticity, and play. In what follows I will analyze both elements of game play and narrative to demonstrate how Diner Dash constructs a microcosm of these larger issues. While, to date, there has been a dearth of media studies analyses of games such as Diner Dash, the growing popularity of this genre makes it a vital area of study.

Women, Casual Gaming, and Leisure

The Diner Dash games are often referred to as being part of a genre known as casual games. According to the Game Developer’s Conference Summit on casual games in 2005¹, casual games:

- Are able to be learned in less than a minute
- Are forgiving of mistakes
- Have a short play time but are highly replayable
- Are both convenient and quick starting
- Are inexpensive or free

¹ http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000535245

Additionally, casual games are often characterized by low-resolution graphics and fairly simple game mechanics. Thus, we can understand casual video games as those which are simple to learn and play, addictive enough that one can play them in short periods of time or for as long as time allows, and are cheap or free. Casual games are often games played on computers, or mobile devices such as phones, palm pilots, or portable gaming systems (such as the Nintendo DS system). Thus, these games can be started and stopped quickly, and can be played in places that are not necessarily meant to be play-spaces.

Industry statistics often show casual games as being particularly popular with women audiences. According to the Casual Games Association’s Market Report for 2007², statistics for all casual game players (both men and women) are about equal (51% and 49%, respectively), and that they are more popular with a slightly older demographic (62% are over 35 and 38% are under 35). Alternately, though, their statistics for paying casual game players (those who purchase in stores or subscribe to online services) skew particularly to women over the age of 35—74% of paying casual gamers are women, and 72% are over 35. Thus, in large part, casual gaming is known as women’s territory.

An interesting way to interpret the popularity of casual games with women is through research on gender and leisure. Since the late 1980s, there has been a growing amount of research on women and leisure practices: primarily how leisure activities are deeply problematic for adult women (Aitchison 2003). Researchers have found that leisure---particularly leisure at home---is a difficult thing to map, often because women have more responsibilities in home-spaces than men do. While men often find the home a place for relaxation and leisure separate from work, women are unable to have the same kinds of unconditional leisure that men have in these spaces (Green et al 1990). Thus, for

² http://www.casualconnect.org/newscontent/11-2007/CasualGamesMarketReport2007_Summary.pdf

women there is often a conflation of work activities and leisure activities: practices may have embedded practicality that negates the importance of leisure and play (Green et al 1990). For instance, activities such as knitting might be leisure to some, but also have the embedded practicality of making wearable items.

Additionally these studies often show that time is a key factor for women’s leisure activities. Rosemary Deem conducted a study showing that women did not feel they had the right to leisure time given the overriding concerns of maintaining households and work responsibilities. This ultimately affects the quality and type of leisure practices that women engage in:

No wonder then that much of women's household leisure consists of needlework, knitting, cooking, reading, TV watching, writing letters, day dreaming and snatching quick naps. All of these activities can be fitted into a fragmented time schedule, don't require large blocks of time, are cheap or free, require little space or equipment and can quickly be disposed of or stopped when work obligations intervene (Deem 1987, p. 81)

Thus issues of women and play have been inextricably linked to issues of time: what a woman considers play or leisure is not necessarily defined only by the activities she enjoys, but also by the activities that fit neatly and cheaply into her fragmented schedule. Thus, for many women, it becomes difficult to see the home as a site for anything but labor. The “second shift” of women’s responsibilities leaves little time for much else, only exacerbating these problems (Hochschild 1989). In The Second Shift, Arlie Russell Hochschild refers to this as a “leisure gap” (Hoschild 1989, p. 4), and suggests that this gap sets up longer term cycles of inequality. Ultimately she suggests that the task of

maintaining dual roles leaves little time for leisure, and it is unsurprising that play is often non-existent in the everyday lives of women.

Parallels between casual game characteristics and women’s leisure are undeniable. Primarily, both accentuate small bursts of play or leisure and are inexpensive or free. The ease with which casual gaming is able to fit into many women’s leisure patterns makes the aforementioned statistics about women and casual games unsurprising. Further, one might speculate that Diner Dash and other casual games helps to reinforce older hang-ups and paradigms regarding women and leisure. According to Nicole Lazzaro in her essay, “Are Boy Games Even Necessary?” part of the major appeal of the Diner Dash is that, in its creation, the developer “focused on emotions that women were familiar with rather than emotions found in a war game. What made the game even more successful was that there were few games offering this emotional experience” (Lazzaro 2008, p. 211-212). This being the case, it seems likely that, at least in part, this emotional experience involves complications that many women have between work and leisure.

Intertextuality, Digitextuality, and Video Games

By any standards, video games are a complicated and difficult medium to analyze. Being partly narrative (Murray 2004, Perlin 2004) and partly computational (Eskelinen 2004, Bogost, 2007) it is often difficult to track a consistent narrative for study as well as a clear rubric for addressing game play. Additionally, the genre “video games” covers a wide variety of media objects that are often only slightly similar. One would be hard-

pressed to compare the interactivity of smaller casual games such as Tetris to massively multiplayer online game worlds such as World of Warcraft. They all have different traits, different aspects, and ultimately different affordances. While one game may be more interactive, another is far more narratively structured. While some games allow user modifications, others are less flexible. Games with online play are poised to involve anonymity, while with single player games this topic becomes irrelevant. Having flexible avatars and identities in some games affords different results than having a fixed avatar, undefined by the player. Video games are not a singular medium, but a group of several media all with similar qualities. Given these broad variations, I would like to suggest that methodologies for analyzing video games should be particular to specific games and not the category as a whole.

My analysis and methodological approach to the Diner Dash games relies heavily on notions of intertextuality. The term, originally coined by Julia Kristeva, alludes to meaning that exists between several texts. Succinctly described by Graham Allen in Intertextuality, he explains: “Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations” (Allen 2000, p. 1). In recent years scholars have used notions of intertextuality to better understand new media phenomena such as the internet, software, and video games. In New Media: Theories and Practices of Digtextuality Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell refer to intertextuality in digital form as “digitextuality.” They explain that with digitextuality, “new media technologies make meaning not only by building a new text through absorption and transformation of other texts, but also by embedding the entirety of other texts (analog and digital) seamlessly within the new”

(Everett & Caldwell 2003, p. 7). These notions of intertextuality and digitextuality are essential to my analysis of the Diner Dash games.

There are many ways to understand and interpret the Dash world, and understanding their intertextuality helps to shed light on these complexities. Intertextuality and digitextuality work in several ways in the Dash games, and the multilayering of texts supports the multiple possible interpretations of the games. Most obvious is the text occurring throughout each of the Dash games. Each of these games progress the story and involve Flo in some form. In the next section I will explain how these game narratives lock together to produce meaning. Intertextuality is a part of the real world texts referencing similar themes of work, leisure, and domesticity. By having the player enact the role of a waitress through play, the Dash games are broaching these themes.

Additionally, there exists an intertextuality (or digitextuality) between the components of game play and narrative, all reinforcing similar topics and themes. If narrative and game play are understood as two separate things (as I have described, many video game scholars see them as such) then a kind of digitextuality takes place connecting these themes and comprising a final text which is the game. All of these discursive texts do not produce a coherent theme in the Dash games; instead the games produce a multilayered discussion about the nature of work, play, and domesticity for women. In effect, the ambivalence of the text reflects a larger ambivalence that many women have towards these issues. In my analysis I use notions of intertextuality and digitextuality to focus on the game narratives, the game play, and how they are tied together. By capturing screen shots, taking meticulous notes of dialogue, in-game instructions, and the connections between each game text, I have analyzed each of the

games in the Dash series. In doing this I illustrate how several themes weave together in this complicated text to describe an even more complicated and ambiguous situation for many women. The multilayered interpretations of the Dash games ultimately mimic the nuanced relationship that many women have with leisure and play.

Welcome to Dinertown!

The Diner Dash games tell the adventures of Flo, a hard working waitress/restaurateur who functions as the player’s avatar. Diner Dash was initially a computer game, but has now become a complex network of games including portable gaming versions for cellular phones and the Nintendo DS. Several of the computer versions have been networked for online gaming. The current computer versions of the game are Diner Dash (2004), Diner Dash 2: Restaurant Rescue (2006), Diner Dash: Flo on the Go (2006), and Diner Dash: Hometown Hero (2007). Of the most recent version (Hometown Hero), there are several plug-in restaurants that can be added to the base game, which places the main character in a variety of surreal situations. For instance, Diner Dash: Flo Through Time (2008) uses time travel predicaments to spice up the play. Other restaurant adventures place Flo as a protagonist in fairy tales and use various seasonal themes. The game Cooking Dash (2009) features Flo trying to take over a kitchen while her cook is away. Additionally, there are several other Dash games, where Flo makes cameos either as a participant (in the Wedding Dash games she serves as an occasional waitress), customer, or confidant. The other Dash games include Wedding Dash (2007), Wedding Dash 2: Rings Around the World (2008), Dairy Dash (2008), Fitness Dash (2008), Parking Dash (2008), and Fashion Dash (2008). All of these games

have women protagonist avatars, and all feature Flo in some form. The interlocking texts all take place in the fictional town “Dinertown” where Flo and her friends live, and presuppose an intertextuality to each of the games in relation to the other games.

The mechanics of the Diner Dash games are fairly simple. The customers request specific things (seats, menus, food, drinks, service, cleaning) and the player (playing the role of Flo) must click on the customer and serve their needs before they get ruffled, angry, or decide to leave the restaurant altogether. If the player serves customers speedily enough, she makes more money and---with enough money---is able to move on to the next level, which generally increases in difficulty. Each game in the Dash series is structured with fifty levels. Every ten levels Flo moves to a different location (usually a new restaurant), pushing the narrative forward. In each level of the game, the game play changes subtly, but the overall purpose of serving the customers to keep them happy remains the same.

The narrative structures are similarly simple and repetitive. At the beginning of each game there is an initial story---always shown in a comic book format---where Flo is presented with a challenge, goal, or situation. The cartoon occurs usually over a few frames, setting up the expectations for the game play (the kind of restaurant being played at, for example). At the end of every ten levels the narrative will move forward, sometimes with a new addition to Flo’s cartoon story. These “cut scenes” (as they are known in the gaming industry) push the story forward, but do not have any interactivity. In the Dash games, a player’s actions do not ultimately affect the outcome of the narratives in cut scenes. At the end of the game, there is a final comic, generally wrapping up the story that was begun at the beginning of the game.

Narratives also occur on a meta-level of all of the Dinertown stories. The complex intertextuality between all of the Dinertown games can help give clues as to who Flo is and some of her possible meanings. There is no one single way of understanding all of the implications of this expansive and ever-growing digital space. That said, there are several possible ways to understand and interpret Flo and the Diner Dash series, and in many ways it is a perfect illustration of many of the conflicts involving women, leisure, work, and domesticity. Both the game narratives and the game play itself suggest this variety of interpretations. In what follows I will outline some of these possible analyses and explanations of the Diner Dash phenomenon.

Work, Leisure, & Play

We are introduced to Flo in the first Diner Dash game while she working at an office. She is shown as a business executive that is being constantly harangued by bosses and coworkers. The initial comic frame opens with, “Somewhere in a dreary office...” and shows Flo sitting at a desk. Several coworkers ask Flo for various reports, and repeatedly chant her name. In frustration, Flo runs out of the office exclaiming, “Man there’s got to be something better than this!” As she attempts to escape her co-workers, she happens upon a restaurant for sale and exclaims, “Of course! My own restaurant!” This setup is very telling of the construction of Flo’s situation. Flo literally travels from one job where she is being harassed and harangued for things to another job where the same thing occurs---but this time serving customers. This alludes to the complex relationship the Dash games have between work and play. In playing Diner Dash a player is literally using their leisure time to play at work.

At its core, one of the most compelling facets of all of the Dash games, and of Diner Dash in particular, is a conflation of work and play that resonates throughout the game. While the game is intended for play/leisure time, thematically it involves work spaces that bear a great deal of similarity to work in the non-game world. The drudgery and repetitiveness involved in waiting on customers often feels more like work than like play. This evokes issues discussed earlier in this essay regarding women and leisure time: essentially like many women’s real world leisure experiences the game never disentangles work from play. That the game is popular with women audiences helps to illustrate how these issues continue to resonate in many women’s lives.

Part of the problematic nature of Diner Dash games as leisure activities are their mimicry of work within a play space. Through Flo, the player is constantly being forced to conflate work and play. During each level, the player takes the role of Flo, maintaining the actions necessary for the character to move on to the next task. At the same time, the player is judged by Flo at the end of each level, determined by whether or not the player has passed the parameters of that level. As such, the player has three different relationships with Flo: (1) She watches Flo in the scenes that occur at the beginning and end of the game, much like how one would watch a film character, (2) The player acts out the role of Flo, identifying with the work the character must do to complete each level, and (3) The player is judged by Flo, either in terms of success or failure of that level. As such, the relationship between the player and Flo is complexed and nuance. The player is Flo, is watching Flo, and is judged by Flo. This complicated relationship between the player and Flo (where Flo is avatar, character, and judge to the player) continues to exacerbate problems where video games become work, rather than a play

space. Because the player’s actions and Flo’s actions are constantly being conflated and interchanged, what is Flo’s work becomes the audience’s play, and vice-versa. For some audience members there may be difficulties in disentangling this relationship, and play time could simply become work time.

Essentially, in-game work stresses reenact stresses that many women experience in the real world. One way this becomes apparent is through the sub-genre of casual games that the Dash games belong to, known as “time management games.” The descriptions of games under the label “time management” often suggest few playful attributes. For example, Big Fish Games advertises a large selection of time management games on their web site and encourages the player by suggesting, “Manage time, customers, and money in games for the serious goal setter.”¹ The lack of playfulness in this definition is notable, but also notable is the use of time management as a marketing tool. In Arlie Russell Hochschild’s, The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work, she discusses issues regarding women and time management. Hochschild asserts that many products for time management are, thus, specifically marketed at women. She explains:

Like men, women absorb the work-family speedup far more than they resist it; but unlike men, women are the ones who shoulder most of the workload at home. Naturally, then, they are more starved for time than men. It is women who feel more acutely the need to save time and women who are more tempted by the goods and services of the growing “time industry.” They are the ones who shop for time. (Hochschild 1997, p. 229--230)

Given this assertion, it seems likely that so-called Time Management Games such as Diner Dash are targeting busy, working women audiences. While the games themselves are not time-savers, the “time management” label might have particular appeal to this demographic. Thus, within its game play style, Diner Dash can be seen as exacerbating these pre-existing issues with women and leisure.

As with other so-called time-management games the Dash series further engages these complex issues involving work, play and time. The label “time management game” is an apt one---not only does the game thematically involve work-related issues, but the mechanics of time-management games have underlying themes of work embedded in objects of play. In many ways, Diner Dash games can be understood as a “third shift.” Hochschild references a “third shift” in The Time Bind, and she discusses it as a potential suggestion for busy families, explaining that it might be used for, “noticing, understanding, and coping with the emotional consequences of the compressed second shift” (Hochschild 2001, p. 215). This is certainly an ideal suggestion for a third shift, but when play and leisure becomes work that, too, might be considered a potential third shift.

Domestic Play Spaces

While the game play of Diner Dash does not necessarily take place in a home, many of the attributes of the game occur in what could be understood as a domestic space where the primary action takes place in kitchen and dining spaces---what are notoriously considered women’s spaces. Domesticity as a form of play is problematic because of the inherent links it has with both femininity and women’s oppression. According to Ruth Schwartz Cowan in More Work for Mother:

The allocation of housework to women is [...] a social convention which developed during the nineteenth century because of a specific set of material and cultural conditions. It is a convention so deeply embedded in our individual and collective unconscious that even the profound changes wrought by the twentieth century have not yet shaken it. (Cowan 1983, p. 150)

Thus, regardless of women finding careers out of the household in the past fifty years, domestic work still stands at a precarious place in our culture---one that has implications of guilt, necessity, and anxiety for many women. As a form of play, the *Dash* games then become somewhat problematic, and their conflation of work/play are inherently linked with domesticity.

In the paper “A Game of One’s Own,” the Ludica Group (a collective of women and game researchers) suggests that domestic spaces are often absent in video games, often making the genre more masculine. But the authors also warn that, “Although domestic space can be a site of play and pleasure [...] it can also connote stifling captivity for women [...]” (Fron, et al 2007a, p. 5). Thus, perhaps, while the domestic settings of the *Dash* games may be a more comfortable environment for some women than *Grand Theft Auto* games, at the same time I argue that the replication of domesticity also makes them ambivalent spaces where work, play, and the domestic sphere are constantly being conflated with one another.

One important consideration when looking at domestic games is what Salen & Zimmerman refer to as the “magic circle” of play. They explain that the magic circle is the separate space wherein play occurs:

The face that the magic circle is just that—a circle—is an important feature of this concept. As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world. As a marker of time, the magic circle is like a clock: it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. The magic circle inscribes a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless. In short, a finite space with infinite possibility (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p. 95).

Thus, the magic circle inscribes the space of play, wherein different rules apply and where play is mediated. When this space replicates real-world domesticity though, one might begin to question how anxieties and tensions about this domestic life might filter through the magic circle, causing these boundaries to get muddied and ultimately affecting the participants’ leisure time.

The Dash games also reinforce stereotypes of women as social navigators in hostess roles. As already discussed, one of the primary aspects of game play is in people management---making sure that specific people sit together or apart. The player is put in the role of the woman who is charged with making these choices. Ultimately, it is not the non-player-characters who suffer for having to sit near someone unsuitable, but the player (via Flo) who suffers by losing customers and getting lower scores. In many ways, the game is teaching this kind of social management to the players. Not unlike a video game finishing school, it can be seen as reinforcing gender roles and expectations.

Finally, because Flo left the business world for what can be considered a more domestic space, there are equally problematic issues. To some extent, Flo’s story can be seen as suggesting that women, growing frustrated in the workplace, might be better

served serving others. While the suggestion of this game is perhaps not one of a stay-at-home mother, the caretaking, people management, and domestic chores put Flo in the role of far more typical feminine stereotypes. While customers have the same demands that co-workers might have had, the suggestion might be that she is more capable of handling domestic spaces.

Flo and Empowerment

At level 40 of the first Diner Dash game Flo is approached by a Hindu goddess. The goddess promises Flo that she will achieve Nirvana (and become a goddess herself) if she helps to open an Indian restaurant. The Goddess explains to Flo, “Run my restaurant successfully and you will finally be my equal! But first...” This moment of empowerment is wrought with potential, though also some conflicting messages. The player-as-Flo is being offered a feminine form of empowerment. After making the offer the goddess rewards Flo by giving her two extra arms and remarks, “NOW you’re ready!” This is a compelling moment in the series. Flo is being offered a great amount of power by a goddess, and an offer to become her “equal.” At the same time, though, having four arms serves a vital function in the game: Flo as an avatar is able to hold extra things in order to wait on tables faster. In many ways this moment in the game creates conflicting messages. On one hand, a powerful role model is becoming even more empowered. On the other hand, Flo is simply being offered the ability to be more domestically efficient. These conflicting interpretations occur often in the Dash series, often mixing agency with service.

In many ways, Flo can be seen as a fairly empowered figure in the world of video games where women are often overwhelmingly sexualized and/or victimized. From the first game, Flo chooses to empower herself by owning a restaurant franchise and abandoning what can be seen as a far more stable office job. Flo helps others, throughout the course of all of the games, attempting to help them become self-sufficient. A pivotal example of this comes at the end of Diner Dash 2. After spending the course of the game helping friends resurrect their businesses Flo says to the audience in a final frame, “Wherever there’s a customer trying to stiff a waiter, I’ll be there. Wherever there’s a dirty table to be cleaned and no time to do it, I’ll be there. Wherever there’s an overworked waiter in need of a break, I’ll be there.” These are powerful statements that are reminiscent of superhero characters, and their bombastic vows to save the world. While what Flo is offering is slightly smaller, it is no less significant: she is asserting that she will always support those in need. In this way she is providing a far more positive role model than many other women depicted in video games.

For the past decade video game scholars have been debating issues of gender and games (Cassell & Jenkins 1999, Cassell & Jenkins 2008). In video game studies it is easy to fall into the trap of always seeing women characters as victims of a male industry. Because of this, there is something satisfying that should not be ignored about a woman who is a small business owner who helps those around her. Flo is always depicted as confident, and always positive that she can do the job at hand. This is a powerful image to promote to women audiences, and Diner Dash has taken the lead with this empowered role.

Different from Lara Croft-like hypersexualized video game characters, Flo is feminine but not sexual. In the third and fourth releases of the game, players are able to change Flo’s wardrobe, dressing her how they see appropriate, giving the player final control over her appearance. The lack of sexualization with Flo runs counter to many pre-existing images in the gaming industry. In Gender Inclusive Game Design Sheri Graner Ray explains that many video game avatars show indications and signals of sexual readiness and fertility. She writes, “In typical female avatar representations, these signals are often ridiculously exaggerated. Often, the player will be offered the choice of a female avatar portrait who’s breasts are huge and seem to almost float under the character’s chin, has a large, round, derriere, and a waist that is smaller than her head” (Ray 2004, p. 102). Neither a victim nor a sex symbol, Flo can be seen as a video game middle-ground that could potentially make for a positive role model for girls and women.

Women and Self Denial

As a counterpart to her empowerment, Flo can also be seen as the ultimate pushover. This is certainly indicative of a name that might imply “going with the flow,” but also in the narratives underlying each of the games. Flo often bends to the will of others, sacrificing her own needs over the needs of others. In fact, other than the desire to own a restaurant, we are never specifically told anything about Flo’s needs and desires. For example, in the first Wedding Dash game, Flo’s roommate Quinn calls her after managing a wedding and complaining that she doesn’t have time to date and never has time for a break. When Quinn asks Flo how she does it, and never needs time for herself, Flo replies, “I don’t really think about it. I have too much fun with my restaurants!”

Similarly, the entire plot of Diner Dash: Flo on the Go is spent with Flo attempting to take a vacation, but then deciding to work at each location rather than relax. At the end of the game, Flo finally gets her vacation after waitressing for ten levels on a spaceship, but this is one frame out of fifty levels, where Flo is finally allowed to relax.

So while Flo is in part sending encouraging messages about women, entrepreneurship, and ownership, she also rarely profits from the work that she has done in the games following the first Diner Dash. In subsequent games Flo waitresses at restaurants to help others or herself to get out of bad situations. For example, in the second game, Diner Dash 2: Restaurant Rescue, Flo returns to help out other restaurateurs in Dinertown who are being shut down by a restaurant mogul, Mr. Big. In the third game, Diner Dash: Flo on the Go, Flo attempts to go on vacation but when she loses her luggage (repeatedly) she decides to work at restaurants to replenish her wardrobe. In Diner Dash: Hometown Hero, Flo visits her Grandmother Florence at the town where she grew up. Upon learning that her hometown has gone downhill, Flo uses her waitressing powers to resurrect the town’s hotspots. In each of these cases the player is given no indication that Flo owns the restaurants she is waitressing at, and presumably is not profiting from.² The second and third seasons of Hometown Hero have a slightly different rationale for Flo’s waitressing. In the second season, Flo Through Time, Flo gets lost in time after her grandmother makes a time machine out of a microwave. Thus it is necessary for Flo to work as a waitress in different time periods to make enough money to get back to her proper time. Similarly, in the third season, Once Upon a Diner, Flo gets lost in a series of fairy tales and stories (again due to negligence on the part of her

grandmother) and works as a waitress in a similar fashion. Obviously, though, Flo is not actually profiting from these events.

Flo’s relationship to customers, too, gives hints that she is far more interested in others than her own needs. In the game, customers are cantankerous, quick to anger, and often impatient. To illustrate a table of customers’ degree of happiness, each table has a series of hearts. As the player works harder to please the customers, the hearts fill up. Alternately, as the customers get increasingly angry, their heart level goes down. Thus, in many respects, the player is serving and cleaning for others in order to figuratively win their love. Hearts are a fairly common measure of health in games, and on one hand their use to show player status in Diner Dash might seem unsurprising. On the other hand, though, while hearts ordinarily depict the health of the avatar, in this game they illustrate the happiness and status of the customers. While this distinction might seem slight, it is telling. While in most video games the player is concerned with their own well-being, the hearts in the Dash games signify the well being of others.

In some ways, this gendered treatment of hearts in video games evokes Lynda Birke’s discussion of hearts in Feminism and the Biological Body. Here, Birke notes that while discussions of heart disease and the mechanics of the heart have masculine connotations, emotional associations with the heart are almost entirely feminine. She explains:

The heart is gendered, not least through its symbolic association with emotionality. Even in the discourses of biomedicine, its apparently neutral status as ‘merely a pump’ carries connotations of gender ... Not only is heart disease so often portrayed as though it were a disease uniquely affecting men (and captured

in advertising campaigns urging housewives to ‘look after your husband’s heart’ by avoiding butter), but even representations of that hearty pump in scientific texts can be read as gendered (Birke 2000, p. 113).

It seems compelling that these gendered interpretations of the heart are so neatly enfolded into video games. Just as Birke suggests occurs in medical metaphors, the diseased heart losing life belongs to more masculine avatars, while the more feminine Flo is concerned with others and their emotionality. Her life is directly connected to the well-being of others.

Similarly, the desires of the customers are shown as thought bubbles and not speech bubbles---implying that Flo must anticipate the needs of customers rather than respond to things that they have asked for. In essence, the game play of all of the Dash games is about serving, feeding, and caring for others, rather than oneself. In “Hunger as Ideology” Susan Bordo discusses women and self-denial. According to Bordo, this is directly linked with ideologies where women are expected to be part of the private sphere, while men rule the public sphere. She explains, “In the necessity to make such a division of labor appear natural we find another powerful ideological underpinning (perhaps the most important in the context of industrialized society) for the cultural containment of female appetite: the notion that women are most gratified by feeding and nourishing *others*, not themselves” (Bordo 1993, p. 118). Along these lines, Flo is never nourishing herself in the game, rarely concerned with herself, and constantly interested in the wellbeing of others.

Conclusion

Games such as Diner Dash have not been examined closely by academia. In some ways, the lack of discussion on the Dash games is reminiscent of what Tania Modleski describes in Loving with a Vengeance. According to Modleski, women’s media (novels, films, and television) are rarely taken as seriously by critics and scholars in comparison to works by and about men. She explains, “Thus women’s criticism of popular feminine narratives has generally adopted one of three attitudes: dismissiveness; hostility---tending unfortunately to be aimed at the consumers of the narratives; or, most frequently, a flippant kind of mockery” (Modleski 1984, p. 14).

Just as with romance novels and soap operas, it is of great importance that we begin to look at popular software and games specifically aimed at women audiences with an un-mocking, serious tone. As I have illustrated, the mechanics and narratives of the Diner Dash games have enough depth that they warrant this further examination. Issues of work, play, leisure, and domesticity all resonate throughout these popular games, and are a vital way to understand larger issues in gender in play.

Obviously, these interpretations only begin to scratch the surface of ways of understanding Flo, Diner Dash, and all of Dinertown. As video games continue to emerge as a popular format for women and girls, it is vital that scholars look closely at both narratives and game play, and also from ethnographic and audience studies perspectives. Research must continue from a variety of methodologies to better understand games that are aimed at women audiences.

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Notes

1. <http://www.bigfishgames.com/download-games/genres/25/time-management.html>
2. While it could be argued that Flo’s new wardrobe in Flo on the Go is profit, she is only replenishing what she has lost, while giving up her vacation time.