SAVING THROW FOR HALF COOTIES
Gaming and the Femininely Advantaged
by Jennifer Brandes and Chris Hepler

Anyone who has ever been to a gaming convention, college science fiction club or hobby shop has probably noticed that the sex ratio among gamers is not fifty-fifty. Numerous articles, web chats and convention panels have sought to explain why, ranging from the lack of female interest in science fiction, to roleplaying's wargaming roots. Others have looked at the effect of adding women to gaming, usually noting how men "clean up" their behavior when women are watching, or present the astonishing fact that women don't necessarily game just for combat.

Frankly, we feel the issue is deeper than simple cosmetic differences in style or history. While it is pleasant for gaming publications to assume players and gamemasters lack flaws, playing in many campaigns quickly proves otherwise, and it is individuals' behaviors which are responsible for shaping and eventually changing the gaming community.

If your female gamers leave or fall asleep during your sessions, if you aren't sure how to invite female friends into your campaign, have trouble playing female characters though you'd like to try, or are a woman looking for a way to tell your gaming friends how you'd like to be treated, the advice below may help you begin.

WOMEN AS CHARACTERS

Two years ago, when we were designing characters for the Gen Con **Earthdawn** tournament, we showed the first drafts to the coordinator, who burst out laughing. "You made the group *half* women," he gasped, "oh boy, we're going to get some quick weed-outs here." We looked at each other in surprise. This was a tournament judging the roleplaying of thirty-six serious **Earthdawn** fans, in which players were to pick up a character sheet cold and within four hours impress a judge with the best acting of their lives. We had written flying dwarven pirates, urbane swashbuckling trolls, tribal orks who could levitate hundreds of feet in the air, two-foot-tall windling archers with a death wish due to lost love, all of whom used magic like it was oxygen, and the other GMs were worried that people couldn't roleplay *women*.

Obviously, we weren't playing the same game.

With the sex ratio in the hobby being what it is, male players in an all-male or predominantly male group will often try playing a female character for variety, or simply to balance the genders in the party. Gamemasters, unless they're running a campaign set in a monastery, eventually *have* to create and run female characters.

This shouldn't be much of a stretch for a good roleplayers. In nearly every game system, the player characters are something other than modern-day 18-35 year old American men. From elves, dwarves and aliens to undead gunslingers and cyber-assassins, PCs can be anyone and anything. Most gamers are proud of being open-minded and creative when they play characters far different from themselves. Dozens of game books devote hundreds of pages to describing the various races, classes, and cultures PCs can have. **Vampire**'s *Elysium* shows you life as a semi-insane two-thousand-year old parasite driven to create "children" and ultimately devour them. The *Denizens of*

Earthdawn books have heaping tablespoons of detail on the five pillars of lizard-man culture and the language of living rocks.

Most of them also have a handy sentence in the character creation section declaring something like "oh yeah, and you can play women, too," with the unspoken assumption that the gamer knows what being another gender is like, or can easily find out.

Do you see a problem here?

COMMON CREATION MISTAKES

Often it is not a serious problem if gamers don't quite understand their character's mindset or fudge the details on behavior. It *is* just a game, and rarely will a real Mafia hitman or elven wizard be watching and criticizing the level of realism.

But when playing a character (or NPC) of a different gender/ethnic background than yourself, the line between poetic license and offensive stereotyping thins, especially if someone of that gender/ethnicity (or someone who is dating one) is sitting right across the table.

CS/TB Syndrome

Our fellow gaming author Zach Bush coined this phrase after seeing what a large percentage of guys made their first female character either a "Complete Slut" or a "Total Bitch." (To be fair, we've also noticed girls' first male characters often fall into CS/DB Syndrome -- either a "Complete Sleaze" or "Dream Boyfriend.")

A disturbingly large number of male players we have seen make female characters in these two stereotypes -- inhumanly beautiful babes who sleep with anyone to get their way or obnoxious, whiny or cruel "ice queens."

The first often appears among guys who are frustrated in their own love lives and compensate by playing "loose" female characters, using the roleplaying to act out fantasies of sexual power. Unfortunately, this often reveals a very aggressive and antagonistic attitude to all women, as the frustrated man sees them as targets or enemies instead of fellow human beings. One male gamer we've known would *only* play female characters, announcing every time he wanted something from an NPC, "Okay, I have sex with him. Now does he give it to me?" in just those words.

There is probably no one this extreme in your group. But consider how many men automatically give female characters a superhuman charisma or attractiveness stat and try to get their way through sex appeal. Hopefully you already understand that it is offensive to assume that only attractive women are worth listening to and that sexual favors are the only commodity a woman has to offer.

The worst misogynism we see is at conventions. In the '96 **Shadowrun** Gen Con tournament, one player picked up his character sheet, a female physical adept and without even reading her history, slammed the sheet on the table and announced, "Oh great, I get to play the bitch."

The next year, at JohnCon, a friend of ours ran a "World of Darkness *X-Files*" one-shot. The man playing Dana Scully, whenever in the middle of combat or an intense investigation, interrupted the other players to announce in a whiny falsetto, "I have to go to the bathroom now. I broke a nail." Now, not only was this utterly out of character for Scully, he was unable to think of a single mannerism for a female character other than a

derogatory (and inaccurate) 1950s-era stereotype.

Some men who describe a female character as a "bitch" seem to only mean "a strong-willed woman who can get something done." If you mean that, say it.

Unfortunately, these problems are rarely contradicted by published gaming supplements. Here's a fun exercise: look at the NPC statistics in your gaming books, convention write-ups, and web pages. Compare the average charisma/attractiveness of male and female characters. Try to find females who are neither superhumanly beautiful nor described as a "bitch" or "ice queen." **Legend of the Five Rings** is particularly rich with developed, varied female characters and established gender roles, but in many games, you'll find neither.

Amazon Fantasy Babe Infection

Even guys who try to be politically correct (whoops...the politically correct term is now "socially aware") often fall prey to the "Amazon Fantasy Babe Infection," the tendency to self-righteously create a female character, fantasy race, werewolf tribe, or Amazon society that is *clearly* as good or better than men: they have more testosterone than an army base, rip people apart with their bare hands, and kill their own children so they have more time to party. In fact, they have gone so overboard in not using *feminine* stereotypes, these characters are now *masculine* stereotypes (yet still superior since they can have multiple orgasms).

Rather than taking the time to think about their female character, such players simply assume that for women to be strong and interesting, they must be just like men. The Black Fury tribe in **Werewolf**, the *Striper: Assassin* series for **Shadowrun**, and a fair number of comic books are examples of this type of thinking.

Fun? Possibly. Annoying? Sure can be.

While it is a nice reflex to throw out derogatory feminine stereotypes, going too far in the other direction isn't the pinnacle of character creation, either. While there are real women who are similar to these three stereotypes, such characters become clichés quickly. Realistic and original characters lie somewhere between extremes.

DESIGNING FEMALE CHARACTERS

Designing a good female character starts the same as any other: come up with a concept and background, choose appropriate skills and attributes, and get started. The bottleneck comes at the "concept and background" stage. Often gaming groups (and children's television series), seem to feel that being female is so unusual that female characters need no other schtick; they are "Woman Man." Considering half the human race shares this "unique" characteristic, it quickly grows stale.

Characters need motivations and habits, quirks and obsessions, friends and enemies. If a player can't answer simple questions about his character's past experiences and present desires, even the coolest schtick becomes routine. Neil Gaiman perhaps expressed the best approach to making good female characters; when asked how he managed to make his women's dialogue sound so natural, he replied that he was "of this belief that women, when alone with one another, sound like human beings."

It takes some people a lifetime to figure this out.

Growing Up Female

On the other hand, there *are* definite differences between men and women, and without understanding and acknowledging that these exist, and that neither is any more "normal" or "right" than the other, it is impossible to make characters that stand up to much scrutiny.

Our society has a tendency to consider males the norm, with women only a minor variation (this can be deadly when medications are tested only on men, then prove ineffective or even toxic in female body chemistry). If you want realism in your games...or good characters you can play for a long time...or more to the point, to avoid embarrassing yourself in front of a girl...here are some things to remember.

Women don't think of femininity as different or strange, any more than men think it's odd to be male, or little kids see themselves as less natural than adults. When growing up, unless you have a specific experience that makes you feel out of place, you assume everyone is just like you. Most self-confident little girls growing up in modern America see that they can do anything boys can *and* when they grow up they can have children. There is no question of inferiority. If anything, women seem superior to men. (Of course, not everyone has a lot of self-confidence.)

Similarly, most people spend their childhoods training for a particular role (whether or not constrained by gender), and a good player will think about what his character is *giving up* when she runs off to be an adventurer/shadowrunner/starship captain/superhero. While our society accepts men who become wanderers or join the military out of inertia or lack of better options, female characters usually need a strong reason (especially in a pseudo-medieval-Earth-fantasy) to give up accepted feminine roles.

Good female characters usually have a driving goal (find my lost child/sibling/ family heirloom, get revenge on the people who killed my parents, learn who abandoned me to be raised by that old shepherd) that brings them onto the road, or are running to escape something (abusive family, horrible arranged marriage, nine-to-five job, life in the convent). The more detailed the reasons, the better the character. Even if she isn't convincingly female, at least she'll be interesting and fun to play, miles ahead of most PCs of any gender.

Important Influences

Remember to think about the *people* who influenced the character. Many males answer this with a martial-arts-movie model, saying the character's teacher was his most important influence before the bad guys killed him. For female characters, however, the choice is often their mother or best friend(s).

Women's mothers are often both a role model and close confidante, and can remain an important tie even through adulthood. (A 45-year-old woman who calls her mother every day is considered to have a good relationship with her. A 45-year-old man who calls his mother every day is considered "tied to her apron strings.") Whether your female character loves her mother or hates her, lost her at an early age, killed her herself yesterday, or still writes her letters at every inn you stop at, flesh out this important relationship.

Most women, from the earliest ages, have one or two close companions with

whom they share every part of their lives. This is so basic it can be hard for women to understand how men live without it. However, male players often forget to include a best friend when writing a female character's history. Even the most well-fleshed-out, interesting, distinct female characters can feel flat or wrong if they have been written with no understanding of the friends who helped shape them.

GMs may want to encourage all players to decide on their characters' parents and friends. By giving a character people to care about, you give plot hooks and motivations that can lead to some of the best adventures (just in case you haven't read the other half-million articles advising you to do that).

WOMEN AS PLAYERS

Many gamers assume women avoid the hobby because of something inherent in the subject matter: women don't like science fiction, or memorizing so many rules, or sitting though combat. A certain world-renowned gaming author and consultant on the hobby once mentioned to us that he didn't think there was a market for RPGs among women because it just wasn't the kind of thing most women were interested in.

When we told him that every woman we introduced to the hobby enjoyed and stuck with it, he didn't know what to say. As hard as this might be to hear, often the problem is not that the women don't like games, but that women don't like *gamers*.

We don't mean that individual gamers don't have female friends, girlfriends and even wives. Most do...however, the question is whether they have these friends *while they game*. Often, even happily married couples are split over the issue of gaming. And it's easier to blame gender differences and give up than to find a way to bridge this gap.

Most women we have found liked gaming when first introduced to it, but have been turned away by bad experiences. However, when isolated and given a second chance, they enjoyed it a lot. Asking what was different, we found that it was not that these women didn't like the people in the mixed groups (they were friends with them outside the game), but that they didn't like how these friends behaved when the dice came out.

The fact that they were playing a game or were "in character" gave these men an excuse to behave the way they always had when gaming: acting like *little boys*. This is nice when you want to be a "kid at heart," but think; little boys are often competitive, violent, and vulgar. Many women see a man's changing behavior when the game starts as a sign that they are not wanted. As one long-time female gamer confessed to us recently, "even though everyone in my present game are really nice to me, I never feel included in their jokes. When they try to include me, it ends up feeling like they're doing me a favor rather than accepting me as an equal participant."

INTRODUCING NEW WOMEN

The problems of introducing any new player into a group very widely depending on the individual and the group, their preconceived notions, personalities, and so on. However, there are certain difficulties common to integrating new, often skeptical, women into an existing gaming group (or the entrenched gaming community).

Please note that *Tastes Like Phoenix* is not *Cosmopolitan*, and we are not inclined to give love advice, tips on How Not to Be a Geek or "Ten Steps to Getting Some (Role)Play." The following principles are merely something to keep in mind when trying

to make women feel at home in your gaming group or at least understand what you find so interesting about your hobby. All else is up to you.

1. Not all women know how an RPG works.

 The first RPG Jenny ever played was **Shadowrun**, where three male players shouted encouragement, contradictions and suggestions on making a character...without explaining what a character sheet was, that the numbers on it corresponded to the dice rolled, or why dice were even used. Watching other long-time gamers teaching beginners, we see this problem a lot. Often they begin the explanation with something like: "the world we're playing in is kind of based on Tolkien..." without explaining what a roleplaying game *is*.

 Especially for women, who may lack even the vague familiarity with "that **D&D** stuff" that most guys get in junior high school, it is important to make your introduction holistic, explaining what the various elements (dice, character sheets, attributes) mean in real-world terms.

 Recognize that new players might not like the same aspects of gaming you do, so give a broad overview: the atmosphere of the world, the ability to play a different person for a while, the chance to be larger than life...or magical...or to vicariously kill stuff. See what aspect the new player looks most interested in, and follow up on it.

 Compare it to something she already knows and understands. If she has tried acting, say role-playing is like improvisational acting, but you roll dice to settle conflicts. Played a how-to-host-a-murder game? "Like that, but you make up your own character and use a fantasy setting." Dressed up as a vampire for Halloween? Played "Make Believe?" Watched *Labyrinth, Dracula, The Neverending Story, Aliens*, *The Princess Bride*, *The Bride With White Hair* or a host of other movies kind of like your game? ("No? Well, you wanna come out and see a movie some time?")

 We have seen many women turned off from games because the guys explaining it talked only about the combat system or what their character did last session. These same girls then got re-interested when someone explained the races, classes, history, and religious system of the world first. Same games; different approach.

2. This doesn't mean they are morons.

 Don't -- and we can't emphasize this enough -- assume that just because a woman is not familiar with roleplaying, that she is incapable of learning it. Computer game manufacturers have made this mistake time and again when trying to market to young girls. When girls didn't buy shoot/beat-em-up games like *Quake* and *Mortal Kombat*, the manufacturers assumed they were too fast-moving or hard to learn. In response, they put out games designed especially for girls, where instead of shooting gore-dripping monsters, they shot at fluffy marshmallow bunnies.

 Needless to say, these failed miserably. Purple Moon Games then actually asked girls why they didn't play the other games. Not a single girl had found them too hard, but every one had found them too *pointless*.

 Similarly, we have yet to meet a woman who couldn't learn an RPG because it was "too complicated." However, we have met many who never bothered to learn the combat system, even after years of gaming, because it didn't interest them and they could always ask someone else in the group.

In our own experience, there was a point when Chris tried to get Jenny interested in **AD&D** after she'd done **Shadowrun** and **Vampire**, and began explaining the system. She said, "I don't get it." Patiently, he started re-explaining it, and she said, "No, no, I heard you. I just don't get why anybody plays like this when you can have a success-based system that makes combat go faster, uses one kind of dice for everything so you don't have to memorize it all, and has a definitive scale that tells you what the numbers mean in real-life terms."

She went on like this for half an hour. And Chris learned that day there were many things he liked about **AD&D**, but he sure didn't know why he'd use its rules.

If someone looks bored, or confused, or doesn't seem to be learning even after numerous explanations, ask why. The answer may surprise you, will probably help you become a better teacher, and is a lot more likely to help a friendship than being condescending or ignoring the problem.

For the most part, women are less interested in rules than in roleplaying through social interactions, which some young or sheltered men avoid in games because they have little experience with them in real life. On the other hand, we know several women with "munchkin" or "power gamer" attitudes, so pay attention to individual preference, not preconceived notions.

3. Roleplaying is not an inherently male activity.

AD&D's first edition and many games made in the 1970s followed a wargaming style, with little emphasis on plot, character development, and storytelling skill, perhaps an explanation for why few women initially joined the hobby. There have been few "Girls' Night of **Advanced Squad Leader**" in our neck of the woods.

Outside the gaming industry, however, uses for roleplaying have little or no gender bias. Psychologists use roleplaying to help patients express fears or learn problem-solving strategies. Anthropology and history teachers sometimes use games to demonstrate economics and government. The Center to Prevent Handgun Violence's S.T.A.R. program uses roleplaying to let kids explore the issue of gun control from the point of view of gun manufacturers, violence victims, and congressmen. These games are carefully structured with pregenerated characters and have only a few rules.

Simple rules? Ready-made plot? Large number of new participants?

Any resemblance to a LARP may not be coincidental.

If you include live-action role-playing, the number of women in gaming skyrockets. We don't know of any reliable indicator of gender distribution among gamers, but we can quote another source you probably didn't expect to see ever associated with gaming: *Swing* magazine, April 1995.

What does one see on the cover of this sassy rag? A pouty model...with fangs and a bloody mouth. The cover article, "Playing Undead," called **Vampire** LARPs "the new 20-something social scene." The author, Douglas Rushkoff, not a gamer, has the great line *"It's as if the game itself were designed to create an environment where a halfway socialized nerd can take advantage of his best attributes in order to get laid."*

If you have EVER wondered why White Wolf LARPs were so popular at conventions while your own favorite game seemed to have fewer adherents, we do not think it far afield to declare, "now you know."

LARPs, or any other RPG variant with streamlined rules, complex plots, lots of

people to interact with and gamemasters who answer questions but don't tell the characters what to do, are likely to attract and keep many more women.

Interestingly, there may not actually be a dearth of female roleplayers, only female gamers. For men, long used to needing a game or other activity to "do" with their friends, roleplaying provides a chance to talk, act out fantasies, and solve problems, all in the forum of a controlled game. Few women need such an artificial situation. Girls, from age 8 or 9 through adulthood, can spend long hours together just chatting: asking each other what they would do in certain situations, what they imagine things will be like in the future, or how they would react if in the position of the characters in their favorite novel...in other words, roleplaying!

For women already used to roleplaying through situations and stories, the question is not *how* do you play, but why spend money and time on gaming books rather than make up your own?

Beware this question. If you can't find a good answer, people will leave. (Hint: "Because the books may have ideas you haven't thought of, the world and characters are neat, and it's something that means a lot to me that I want to share with you...")

4. Helping does not mean controlling.

One female friend of ours was complaining one day, saying, "I really like roleplaying, and I want to do more of it, but I had to drop out of the game I was in because of my boyfriend. He's so concerned that I have a good time he doesn't let me speak." In trying to make "suggestions," her boyfriend was in the habit of literally taking away her character sheet, looking at her skills and telling the GM what she wanted to do without so much as consulting her.

While this guy thought he was being nice by making sure her *character* was included in the action, he had forgotten completely about the *person*.

When trying to "help" a new player, remember that what you want is for her to have fun...not always synonymous with her character being successful in an action. Having fun usually means being able to speak up and know your suggestions will be heard -- not necessarily implemented, but listened to and considered.

Many people are raised not to interrupt, so to players in the thrall of an exciting in-game conversation, they may seem disinterested or be forgotten. A perceptive gamemaster pays attention to the newest and quietest player; specifically asking what her character is doing to encourage her to get involved in the storyline. If the GM does a good job, within a few sessions she'll be shouting with the rest.

On the other hand, you may not *have* a good GM. If so, try to help an uncomfortable new player by asking for her suggestions, keeping an ear out for any soft, easy-to-overlook comments, and calling other players' attention to them. Often someone unfamiliar with typical RPG play will come up with plans and ideas 180 degrees different than the conditioned response the GM expects.

5. Female players are there to play the game, not to get hit on.

We have known too many men, especially young and inexperienced ones, who treat the women at their gaming table as an object for their own entertainment rather than someone who came to enjoy herself. Many of the above problems result directly from the symptoms of Gaming Woman Brain Freeze.

This is what happens when you are talking to someone while your brain is going "Wow. I like sitting near this person. It's of the opposite sex. It's different. I'm completely out of things to say. What the hell do I do now?" and you end up staring at her all night whenever the GM isn't waving a map in front of your face.

The answer to your question is listen to them, treat them like people, and try to help them have fun. Beneath all the gender differences, people are basically similar, and anyone devoting 4-16 hours to a game is there because they want to have a good time. So relax.

Here's a quick syllogism to remember.

1) Do you deny that women are people?

2) Have you ever caught yourself saying "I don't understand women?"

3) Have you noticed that this means you are saying "I don't understand people?"

4) Are you comfortable with this, knowing that you can learn more if you try, the same way you spend hours memorizing rules for a game system?

Be open to new ideas, willing to learn, and most importantly willing to try out what they think is fun in return for their favor of playing your game, and both of you will end up having a better time.

6. Macho does not equal sexy.

Picture this. Seven people sit down to play **AD&D**. All of them are freshmen in college, six guys and one girl. All the guys are interested in hooking up with the girl, and want to impress her. Do they therefore compete to be nicest to her, making sure that the GM hears her suggestions and lets her character get some spotlight time even though she's a little shy?

No. They spend the night showing off, challenging each others' characters, almost getting arrested so they can brag about their pickpocketing abilities, and end up in an intra-party combat that almost degenerates into an out-of-game fight.

And what does the girl see? Does she swoon at the rippling musculature of medieval manhood that stands before her? No. She sees a bunch of boys who are stupid enough to fight with their best friends over numbers on pieces of paper. Believe us, guys, having a character with big stats is about as impressive and sexy as showing someone your latest calculus test.

If you want to introduce someone to gaming (especially a girl who has very little idea what the whole thing is about and came because all her friends are guys and if she doesn't go to the game she'll have nothing to do this Saturday and maybe they can get it over with quickly so they can catch a movie), don't show off what you can do in-game. To find such actions impressive, your listener must first believe the game is worth caring about.

7. *DO NOT RAPE THEIR CHARACTER.*

We hope this is the most blindingly obvious, what-the-hell-planet-are-you-on statement you have ever read, yet over and over we meet women with horror stories to tell. A friend of ours, now a successful gaming artist, was not three hours into her first **AD&D** session when one party member declared he was raping her. Rather than stopping him, all four other party members *joined in*. To this day, this woman will not play a female character. We only wonder that she ever played a second session.

Another friend of ours describes a game that "I was lucky to get out of when I did." On the night after she left, the party got arrested by the city watch. After throwing the PCs into separate cells, the male gamemaster had the guards rape every female character. The women left in tears and never returned to roleplaying, while, as our friend described incredulously, "the GM never understood what he did wrong."

In yet another game, a friend of ours ended up playing the self-described "town slut." Though this was not a role she wanted, she had felt so pressured that she "ended up giving it away before someone tried to take it."

These three examples are from three different states (New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland) in three different decades (late '70s, mid-'80s and 1997), yet describe disturbingly similar situations. These women are not alone.

Roleplaying games allow people to act out fantasies in a forum where, as the ads and magazines say, "the only limit is your imagination." So think long and hard about what you and your imagination want. Killing another person's character primarily signifies "beating" them at the game, not a real desire to commit murder. Roleplaying rape means one thing, and can be legally prosecutable harassment.

Imagine how you would feel if every time a player mentioned killing your character, you knew they were wearing a gun.

In-Character Sex

This doesn't mean that you can't use sex, romance and sexual tension as an element in your games. You just have to make the signals clear.

Fleshed-out, realistic human characters of both genders have sex drives, and flirting, romance and sex are natural parts of life. Whether characters become sexually involved is entirely dependent on the players. When all parties involved are comfortable with the topic and they and their characters agree to it, in-character sex is fun, harmless and often helps the plot by making sure PCs care about each other. If you're both red-faced and laughing, you're doing it right.

When there is the possibility of an out-of-game relationship, it is usually best to stay far from in-character sex. Such situations can put the participants under a lot of pressure unless they both are open, friendly and understand if and how far such relationships extend to the real world.

Do *not*, unless specifically *told*, assume that an in-character relationship has any meaning outside of the game. Obsessing over or stalking someone is not funny or sexy, and will only *damage* any hope of romantic involvement. As much as you might root for the villain in horror movies, most people don't and no one wants to date him.

A big key to this is observing the difference between flirting (joking around with sexual banter) and sexual pressure (which implies you want something more than a joke). Keep the two straight and you will save everyone some pain.

WOMEN ALONE: A CASE STUDY

In order to test our hypothesis of female gaming styles, Jenny began gamemastering "the all-female game" in January of 1997. The group is made up of seven women between the ages of 18 and 26, all girlfriends of gamers, one of whom had never gamed and four of whom complained about other campaigns being ruined by annoying guys. We say "the" all-female roleplaying game because it is the only one we know of.

The group wanted a fantasy setting, and we decided on a game with a complex but flexible world and system: **Earthdawn**. Initially, we wondered how true to stereotype our players would be. Would we have a party of all elf and windling pacifist spell-casters? No. As it turned out, the characters varied widely, though there were marked differences to a typical male group. The primary difference, not surprisingly, was in the lack of emphasis on pure combat. Only one character lacked combat skills entirely, but no one chose the Warrior, Sky Raider, and Cavalryman Disciplines which focus on combat *to the exclusion of much else*. The girls' characters included an elf beastmaster, windling troubadour, human journeyman, winged-t'skrang taildancer (male), human wizard (male), t'skrang swordmaster, and a late-joining ork nethermancer. Chris ran a recurring elf NPC after the third session, by general consensus that he was "almost cool enough to be a girl."

Playing the Game

From the beginning, the group cooperated better than any male or mixed group we'd seen. When making a decision, they consulted all members, even the quietest ones, and arguments during planning were always friendly, verbal only (i.e. no character threatened to kill another, a first in our experience), and had no ramifications outside of the game.

Unlike many male gamers we've seen whose response to a slow plot is to look for something to waste -- and eventually taunt and go after each other if there are no convenient NPCs -- the girls' game's quieter moments were filled with in-character conversations, flirting and sex.

The most surprising development, at least for the males who came to watch, was how much time the women's game spent on this last subject. Most in-character conversation both joked about and dealt frankly with sex, there were two in-character relationships, and (for the beastmaster) a new NPC to seduce in every town. Although one or two women seemed uncomfortable with the topic, the others merely found roleplaying to be a fun forum for sexual joking and experimentation in a situation (imaginary and with all other girls) where there was no pressure.

One of these things is not like the other...

Coincidentally, we ran the same adventure for the girls' group and for a mixed group as a convention demo game. In the adventure, the party finds an abandoned elven baby outside Blood Wood. They soon realize it is a blood elf child, whom someone nearly killed by cutting out its thorns and most of its skin. When the party goes to sleep for the night, they are attacked by a pair of trained ethandrilles (wolves with thorns growing from their bones) which try to grab and carry off the baby. Eventually, the heroes learn that normal elves have been kidnapping blood elf infants in an attempt to rear them normally. The party must choose whether to return the baby to her parents or to do as the kidnappers want -- kill the child since it is better it die than be corrupted.

Ultimately, both groups returned the child to her parents without mass bloodshed, but the differences between the styles of play were noticeable.

For starters, the convention group was harder to motivate, treating the baby as a plot hook rather than showing any affection or concern for her. The all-female group, though they joked that we were "taking advantage of their maternal instincts," still had

one of the highest levels of involvement we've seen; they examined the child's wounds, cared for her, and held a Naming ceremony so she wouldn't be deprived of a Name (the basis for all magic in **Earthdawn**).

The single biggest difference came in the ethandrille attack. The convention group was fairly typical: each player attacked separately, and after much dice rolling and three characters wounded, they finished them off within an hour or so.

The all-female group -- with no planning, no out-of-character communication, roleplaying like they'd just woken up, with three fewer players and about average rolls -- tore the ethandrilles into hamburger in *two rounds*. You've got to play **Earthdawn** to recognize just how fast that is for something to die.

This wasn't about viciousness, but teamwork. It was their fourth session together, and yet they fought like the Secret Service with swords. The beastmaster immediately sounded an alarm and handed off the baby to the NPC air sailor, who leapt into a tree to keep it safe. The journeyman lit up the place with spells, spotting the ethandrille stalking the air sailor, who handed the baby off to the windling, who flew the child completely out of range. After the sword- and beastmaster double-teamed the first ethandrille, they wounded the second to enrage it, and drove it against the tree so the air sailor the beast had forgotten about plummeted down with a hatchet and crushed its skull. For good measure, they torched the bodies to hide the smell of blood that might attract predators and left the area in case something else was looking for them.

Hopefully this case has put to rest any lingering doubts about female gaming ability. Many magazines have already mentioned that being able to game with people of all genders and the closeness that can come from roleplaying with your girl/boyfriend is well worth the effort of introducing them to the game. While we have begun our study, it is not particularly scientific, and results may vary.

Start your own all-female campaign and let us know.

WHEN IN THE LIBRARY OR BOOKSTORE, CHECK OUT...
1. Barry, Dave. *Dave Barry's Guide to Guys*. A humorous look at the ways guys think and trials of having to share a remote control (or dice bag) with one.
2. Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy*. A study of gaming in the 1970s which has quite a few horror stories about rape and rape fantasies in male-dominated groups.
3. Goodall, Jane. *In the Shadow of Man* and *Through a Window*, (also Sarah Hrdy's *The Woman that Never Evolved*). Primate groups look a lot more like human social groups than most people care to admit. The next time your players start acting like the chimps, langurs and monkeys in these books, it may be time to reread some of the advice above. We are not kidding.
4. Heimel, Cynthia. *Sex Tips for Girls*. It's not just for girls. It's for anybody who wants a lot of laughs about the dating scene from a female perspective.
5. Tannen, Deborah. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Not as hard and fast sociolinguistics as advertised, but a start for understanding the opposite sex and how to change unconsciously offensive speech patterns.

WOMEN IN GAMING WEB SITES
1. Hazel's Room: Women In Gaming (http:// www.geocities.com/Area51/Labyrinth/ 5135/hazel.html). More humor and fewer serious articles, but still interesting.

2. RPGNet (http://rpg.net/news+reviews/columns). Mostly a generic gaming page, with a few good articles on the issue of women in gaming.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jennifer Brandes and Chris Hepler fell in love over a **Vampire** game while the other boys were busy killing each other's characters. They have since introduced a dozen or so women to the hobby, written *Cyberpirates* for **Shadowrun**, *The Ork Nation of Cara Fahd* for **Earthdawn**, *Paranoia: The Third Edition* and most recently *Bearers of Jade* for **Legend of the Five Rings**.