Pretty good for a girl: gender, identity and computer games.

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ABSTRACT
Young people's participation in online digital culture is one of the most efficient means by which they become proficient in the management of Information and Communications Technologies and the new literacies emerging there. This paper reports on a small project investigating the gendered dimensions of teenagers' engagement in and out of school with stand-alone and multiplayer computer games. The study explored the game playing practices of a group of students in an English curriculum unit and the social and game playing practices of a group of young women of South East Asian backgrounds in a LAN café who had formed their own Counterstrike clan. It found that expertise is not just a matter of specific skills, strategies and familiarity, but is more broadly located within the complex dynamics of in- and out-of-school discourses and contexts that need to be factored in to the construction of gender-equitable pedagogy and curriculum.

Keywords
Gender, learning, identity, curriculum, English, computer games

INTRODUCTION
Young people's participation in the online world of digital culture is one of the fastest and most efficient means by which they become proficient in the management of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), and in the new literacies emerging there. In a predominantly male field, however, less is known about what characterizes and contributes to young women's successful participation in online popular culture. This paper reports on a small project investigating the gendered dimensions of teenagers' engagement in and out of school with stand-alone and multiplayer computer games[i]. The aim of the project was to identify characteristics of successful girl game players, and to consider ways in which they might be utilized in the production of English/literacy curriculum for both boys and girls. Information that helps teachers and systems design curriculum that engages productively with ICT-based texts and literacies is significant for schools and systems seeking to imagine and anticipate how

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literacy communication and curriculum might effectively be reconfigured in the networked society. The project was thus centrally concerned with the views and practices of girls and young women who saw themselves as capable and competent players of computer games. In relation to curriculum, it sought to generate understandings about what characterizes young women's successful participation in computer games and hence, to gain insights into ways in which curriculum utilizing ICTs might more productively create hospitable environments, activities and opportunities for girls.

The research was carried out in two locations. The first phase was conducted in a co-educational independent school in the relatively affluent southern suburbs of Melbourne, capital of the state of Victoria, with a group of largely Anglo-celtic young Australians. An English curriculum unit for a Year 8 class was organized around three age appropriate computer games. The unit was planned jointly between the classroom English teacher and the researchers, Catherine Beavis and Claire Charles, and took place over a two-week period at the end of term. The teacher and her students were interviewed at the start and end of the unit, and a third time towards the end of the year. Data also included the analytic grids completed by the students, audio-taped group discussion, their imaginative writing and videotapes of the presentations where they played and spoke about their game.

The second phase of the project was located in a suburban Local Area Network (LAN) internet café which was a specialist centre in Melbourne for clan wars and competitions around the game *Counterstrike [*20]. It focussed on the social and game playing practices of a group of young women of South East Asian backgrounds who had formed their own clan. Five young women aged 18-22 were observed on site during a six week competition and interviewed about the game, their history as game players, and their experiences as members of an all girls clan. The age difference between these players and the schoolgirls was taken into account in the analysis of interviews, together with the differences in location, so that observations about both groups were seen as part of a continuum rather than as the same. Similarly, differences were noted between those students, both boys and girls, who were regular game players out of school and those who were not.

LOCATION, GENDER AND GAMEPLAY

In playing computer games, young people are making use of ICTs for their own purposes, in complex and pleasurable ways. Computer games are an important aspect of what Sefton-Green [19] describes as 'a wider ecology of education where schools, home, playtime, the library and museum all play a part' (np). As such, they are a valuable site for exploring the ways in which new and older forms of literacy and multimodality combine, changing understandings of what constitutes text and engagement and providing insights into the highly effective learning principles incorporated into games as an essential precondition of commercial success and play. However, as Facer [10] and others point out, much games research, while identifying the power of games and play to generate motivation or 'hard fun' fails to 'recognize the social contexts in which games, fun and learning take place. They focus on the characteristics of the activity itself, on design issues, rather than on the player's experience, attitudes and interests' (np).

As social geographers (Soja [22], Skelton and Valentine [21], Holloway and Valentine [14]) suggest, context and location play an important role both in the construction of meaning and the

formation of identity and community, for young people as for others. It is not helpful to over-generalize about games and gender regardless of the widespread temptation to do so. Citing Haraway on the need for 'a politics of location', Ang [1] argues for a 'particularist perspective for research into gender and media consumption'. She asserts 'the fundamental instability of the role of gender in media consumption practice' and the impossibility of assuming prearticulated gender identities. Gendered practices, she argues, are shaped at the site of interaction with media technologies, with both gender and media consumption both needing to be problematised. As Charles and I have argued elsewhere, Ang's observations suggest that gendered identities do not simply pre-exist the act and location of game play. Rather, they are actively formed and constituted through particular instances of game play in particular contexts [4].

These two sites then, provided very different but particular instances in which to explore the ways in which the boys, girls and young women in our study engaged with computer games, and the meanings both the games and their involvement with them had for them. With the school students, we were very aware of the heightened artificiality of the research site. Even for those students who played computer games at home, the presence of games in the classroom, hitched to curricular activities and purposes, was likely to change important aspects of their reading and play. We were conscious of the ways in which texts and purposes often change when appropriated for institutional purposes, and the powerful effects of location on both reading and identity, consistent with the socially situated nature of literacy practices. During our interviews and observations of the students, we found both continuities and contradictions between the ways they played and presented themselves during the classroom lessons and what they told us of their game playing and leisure preferences and activities at their friends' places and at home. In the case of the young women in the *Counterstrike* clan at the internet café there was less dissonance between the research site and the interviews, and a closer approximation to a more 'natural' ethnographic study was possible.

COMPUTER GAMES IN THE CLASSROOM

The first phase of the project had two aims: to investigate the literacy practices of successful male and female gamers in their approaches to the games and tasks set as part of the unit, and second, to trial ways of successfully integrating the texts of the new media technologies into existing English curriculum. We used the selected games to investigate how we might build links between students' in and out of school textual worlds, and develop strategies to help with analysis and reflection on digital texts such as computer games. To do so, we devised a range of tasks and activities analogous to those used when studying novels, films and other media and literary texts. We were especially keen to find ways to foster close textual analysis of computer games, and to provide opportunities for reflection, cooperative problem solving, imaginative and creative writing and analytic work (see further Beavis and Charles [4]).

The unit was developed around three games: *The Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic* [23], *The Age of Mythology* [16] and *The Sims Deluxe Edition* [9]. The games were chosen to represent a range of genres, on the assumption that each genre differed in terms of the practices required for 'successful' playing, the pleasures and challenges on offer, and the kind of narrative/fantasy worlds created in the games. Game choice was somewhat constrained by the need to provide age-appropriate materials for these 14-15 year olds. *The Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic,* a

stand-alone role-playing game, was chosen to approximate more extended online and stand alone RPGs. *The Age of Mythology* is part of the well-known series of strategy games, requiring the player to create and maintain armies, villages and food supplies whilst simultaneously battling invaders. A number of students in the study were already familiar with this game. *The Sims* was also well known to many of the students, with the teachers' observations about its popularity providing the original impetus for developing a unit around games. The strong consumer values in the game, as well as its popularity with both boys and girls made it an excellent candidate for critical evaluation. We wanted to capitalize on the students' experience with the multi-modal nature of these technologies out of school in order to help them investigate and reflect on how the various modes such as graphics, sound and print work together to construct ideology, position players and create a textual world.

Multiple copies of the three games were bought and loaded onto the pod of laptops kept in a locked cupboard in the corner of the room. IT support staff at the school arranged password access for the students, together with good quality mice to enable them to bypass the thumb pad for more effectively play. Students worked in pairs around each laptop and were given extended class time to get to know the workings of their game. Other activities included creative and analytic writing exercises, discussions and the saving and presentation of selected clips via data projection on the last day. The two researchers, the teacher, and a student teacher who was an experienced game player were also in the room, observing, answering questions, and providing technical advice. Some students were avid players of these and other games, others had played some games but not these ones, and others again had previously had little interest or exposure to computer games. There were both male and female students in the first two categories, but only girls in the third. While all the boys in the study were able to demonstrate some level of competence with their game, a number of them commented in interviews that they were not interested, or less interested than they had been, in putting extended time and energy into games in their spare time. They were somewhat dismissive of those who were. We were thus in a position to see how students in each of these groups approached the games; how they interacted with each other, what resources they drew on to work out how to play, what strategies they used when they became stuck or frustrated, what they enjoyed or disliked about the games, and how they used them in connection with their relationships with others, their sense of self and in their performance of identity.

Approaches and Strategies

Facer [10] summarizes the implications of Prensky's ten characteristics of the 'new cognitive abilities' generated by young people's 'regular and intensive' game play:

The ability to process information very quickly, determining what is and is not of relevance to them; the ability to process information in parallel at the same time from a range of different sources; the familiarity with exploring information in a non-linear fashion - ie by 'jumping' through a range of different information resources, creating links rather than following a 'story'; the tendency to access information in the first instance through imagery and then to use text to clarify, expand and explore; familiarity with networked, non-geographically bounded networks of communication; a relaxed approach to 'play', viewing this as a valid activity and conceptualising the computer as primarily a 'play tool'; expecting reward for activities; and having a model of doing in order to learn, rather than learning in order to do. Finally, these

characteristics also include a relaxed acceptance of fantasy as a valid space of experience and a view of technology as a friend, familiar through having grown up with it.

In the course of our observations and interviews with the students, most of these characteristics were apparent. Their distribution corresponded more closely to players' levels of experience and interest than to whether they were boys or girls, but as more of the boys than girls had at least some familiarity with games, they drew upon these understandings and strategies more readily. To access some of their strategies and approaches to game play, we asked the students how they would get into a new game, how they learnt how it worked, and what they did when they got stuck. Other questions canvassed their views on what made a good player, how they found out about new games and what use they made of things like the back-story on the box and the introductory film clips and tutorials.

One thread of those Facer describes, 'a relaxed approach to "play"' provides an example of how the attitudes and practices amongst these students was spread across the group. Mark[ii] described himself as a good player and was regarded as an expert by the others:

> CB: When you're playing a new game, how do you get into it typically?
> Mark: Play it a lot and try and get past the first levels. So keep going on.
>
> CB: How do you learn how a game works?
> Mark: Play it a lot basically. Just keep at it and then you try everything you can possibly do. Look around for things that are not so obvious and then, you know…. Just go… if it's like an RPG then you look around just like the whole level so you find for instance a step, maybe you keep going. Stuff like that. So it's a big level to play.
>
> CB: What do you do when you get stuck?
> Mark: Get angry.
>
> CB: And then?
> Mark: And then not play for a while, come back, and then I usually get it. Have a few tries and then I get it again. I don't know.
>
> CB: So you reckon going away helps you get it?
> Mark: Yeah, it does. Cause you calm down and then you can think clearly with what you're doing.

Mark's approach was in striking contrast to Henry's. Henry, who 'just play[ed] occasionally when I'm with friends and stuff', used similar strategies but was less prepared to persist, and lacked Mark's serendipitous assurance that things would work out if he just kept calm and kept trying:

> CB: when you're playing your game, how do you get started? How do you work out how it works and things like that?
> Henry: Probably just practice on the instructional bit and yeah, just start straight away and then you get better as you go along.
>
> CB: What do you do when you get stuck?
> Henry: Nothing really. Cheats, they help you get through. Usually I just give up. I'm not

that determined.

Emily, an experienced *Sims* player, valued persistence when she got stuck, and was not undermined by problems that seemed insurmountable. She was confident in her ability to work around them and make use of her knowledge of the resources offered by the game:

CB: How did you learn how *the Sims* worked?

Emily: It has… when you first start playing there's this little house that you can click on and it teaches you how to play. It has like a little arrow and there's like a book that comes with it, how to explain.

CB: How do you get better at it?
Emily: Practice I suppose.

CB: What do you do when you get stuck? Do you get stuck?
Emily: Yeah, I've been stuck before. I just don't save it and just get out and go back in again and try and avoid that.

CB: So when you get stuck, and there's a problem, you just avoid the problems and try again as required?
Emily: yeah, or sometimes you can fix them but if it's something major happens then just go back out and get back in again.

CB: And is that a problem for you?
Emily: No, not that much.

In teaching her partner Sue, a novice, to play, and deciding how to organise the presentation of the clip they had saved, Emily combined generalisable strategies and knowledge specific to the game:

Emily: Sue hasn't really played *the Sims* before, so I just taught her everything. I just said 'OK, you can choose all the characters and then I'll show the class what we're going to do.' And yeah, what we've done and that… I just told her… I showed her how to change heads and like how to get different parts of people and how to change personality and then I showed her a few things and then she chose the genie. She thought that one was the most interesting.

It was apparent that the confidence generated by such a way of viewing both the game and the player's success at it made a significant difference to the students' pleasure in game play and their preparedness to persist and solve problems when they arose. This 'relaxed approach' related closely to how often students played, though whether a cause or a result of extensive game experience was not clear. It did not appear to be particularly gender related, except that, as indicated above, as the boys in general played more frequently than the girls, more of their comments implied this sort of attitude.

Gendered and classroom identities.

In many ways, texts and identity lie at the heart of English curriculum. Explorations into both

ways in which technocultural texts such as digital games might be brought into the subject for study, and for the ways in which technology might be incorporated into school curriculum, need to recognize the centrality of identity in young people's engagement with school curriculum, and the ways in which school subjects may operate as a 'discursive resource for a project of self-formation' [12,17]. This means the observation of strategies and practices such as those described provides useful but limited insight into deeper relationships and co-constructions around games, game play and gendered identity. As Consalvo [8] and others observe, ' a game is not simply a text to be read, but an experience to be had.' Bell's admonition [5] to 'read cyberspace at the intersections of technology and representation, and see the two as mutually implicated in constituting our approach.' is particularly appropriate to the study of young people's playing of computer games. Here, the text of the game is both made and read, and the game the players make, together with displays around it, in turn becomes a forum for the representation of self. The last section of the classroom unit provided a dramatic demonstration of these intersections. Students had to present and demonstrate a saved clip they had created to the rest of the class, in order to show 'how it works' and give some account of the multimodal elements contributing to the narrative, feel and ideology of the game.

Most striking was the contrast between the clip presented by Emily and Sue, and that shown by Mark and Joe. When Emily and Sue presented on *the Sims*, Emily rapidly built a lavishly furnished mansion that showed her expertise as a player of the game and the rewards for taking on its proffered ideologies of consumption, materiality and display. When it was Sue's turn however, against Emily's advice, she rubbed a magic lamp and produced a genie. The house filled up with cockroaches and the girls spent the rest of their presentation spraying every corner of the house, urged on by shrieks and commentary from the class. Mark and Joe, also presenting on *the Sims*, took at different tack. They bought and piled up tables inside their house, then launched a rocket to set them alight. In the meantime, their character, a young female Sim, slept then woke trapped inside the house, which eventually burnt down as the boys somewhat casually debated whether and how to save her. Eventually, accompanied by much smoke, noise and music, the house burnt down, bringing an end to their character, the house, and the game. This too was greeted with considerable energy and approval by many in the class, who cheered and clapped, called for the fire engine, and were particularly delighted when the Grim Reaper appeared.

Walkerdine [24] argues that computer games 'offer one site for the production of contemporary masculinity' and that 'the task for boys and for girls is different in each case…[girls] have to pursue the demands of contemporary femininity which blend together traditional masculinity and femininity'. This did seem to be in evidence here particularly for Emily. For example, in her interviews and taped discussions with her group and in interaction with the boys, Emily made it clear that she, too, knew about the many subversive options built into the game. While on the one hand she sought to induct Sue into a 'pure' experience of the Sims, and in her play at home willingly entered into that version of the game where she and friends built characters like themselves and acted out imaginative scenarios, she was also keen to demonstrate to the boys that she was both knowledgeable and cool, and hence (like) one of them. When she, Joe and Mark were introducing Sue to the game, Sue claimed the game was 'pretty boring … just making other people do things'. In reply Emily argued first, that 'it's like fun, experimenting', then in reply to Sue's somewhat scornful view of this ('what, like making people flirt and … hug and things like that') responded 'No, like you can with the fireworks, you can… blow them up'.

However, it was not only the girls who demonstrated mixed attitudes to and pleasures in the game. Mark, for example, who in the demonstration did in fact destroy the house in the way Emily described, in this earlier induction episode also tried to persuade Sue the game was fun: 'No, it's cool, cos you … get to make your house, your dream house…. it's just unrealistic and it's cool.' The way Mark played the game involved creating anarchic characters, endless leisure and chaotic uses of space. Similarly, while he was happy to go along with the burning incident in the demonstration with which the unit culminated, Joe spoke privately in a later interview of his regret over burning a house he was quite proud of and into which he had invested considerable time. A less stereotypical reading of this ending, albeit still inflected by gender, is that the students were engaged in a different kind of exercise, creating narrative and closure out of the game play spaces offered by *the Sims*. The creative and subversive play evident in ending the game so dramatically worked on a different plane to build connections and satisfyingly resistant bonds between students, from a range of positions and with differing degrees of technological sophistication and facility.

The contradictory positionings evident amongst both boys and girls were part of the complicated allegiances and 'identificatory investments' that Ang describes [1]. This view of their interactions cuts across seeing these examples as straightforwardly feminine/consumerist and masculine/misogynist respectively. In the complex context of the classroom, game playing practices and preferences contributed to and took their place within the larger project of identity construction under way. Haas Dyson [13], Beach and Bruce [2], Chandler-Olcott and Mahar [7] and others point to the ways in which young people use popular culture as a resource for identity work. In the classroom context, this work was taking place not just in relation to the establishment and confirmation of gendered identities, but also with respect to other issues. These included classroom relationships, school curriculum, the novelty and uncertain status of the unit, teacherly expectations and the need to both conform to and resist these. Opportunities for disruption and the display of humor, irony and expertise all contributed to the ways the students performed, presented and spoke about game play.

BUTTERFLY AND THE GIRL GAMERS CLAN.

Five young Asian women, aged 18 to 22, make up Butterfly's all girl *Counterstrike* Clan. The team is the third Butterfly has put together, as she searched for girls who were skilled, prepared to train hard, have fun, and able to work together as a team. Some members of the clan had been part of earlier iterations, based at a different LAN cafe than the one she and her team presently patronize. The LAN café she plays at now, *Emuse*, is organized entirely around game playing, with little or no infrastructure of any other kind. Located in out of the way street in a Melbourne suburb, away from the shopping centre, it has minimal signage and advertising and presents as a windowless standalone building fronting directly onto the street. Inside, it is a dark, barn-like space, with rows of computers and chairs, a very basic business area and 'lounge' in the front corner, and a room at the back for time out, storage and sleeping. Its business is almost completely organized around *Counterstrike* competitions it runs itself over a period of weeks, or linked into competitions between other local, state and interstate teams and cafés.

The processes observed in the classroom setting, whereby the students' engagement with the games, the ways they played, the versions of the games they created and the ways their game

playing worked to shape and consolidate their relations with each other and their construction and presentation of self, were even more evident in our interviews with Butterfly and her clan. Like the classroom students, Butterfly and her group's commitment to the game and competition were linked to broader 'identificatory investments'. These included a repositioning of themselves in relation to their boyfriends, with whom they competed as well as with other teams, and their sense of themselves as expert and special in relation both to males and to other girls. More, as was readily apparent on observing their game play, their femininity was intensified by the contrast provided by the presence of male players who dominating the spaces both of the café and the game. This was evident not just in the ways they played and spoke, but also in their dress, their petite frames, their interactions with each other and other players, the ways they were physically dwarfed as they played in the LAN's large black executive chairs,

While much research suggests that 'female identity as gamers is contextually-restricted, in that gaming in male dominant environments "is not socially rewarding for females"' [18], for Butterfly and her team this was explicitly not the case. Rather, a large measure of their pleasure and satisfaction in being a female team stemmed from exactly that - the uniqueness of their position, and the ways in which this overturned male complacencies and expectations about gendered practices and identities. Butterfly described her experience when playing 'anonymously' from home to exemplify the gendered assumptions she encountered about girls' facility with the game:

> [When playing on a server from home] usually I use a girl's name, because I call myself Butterfly… as my nickname, and what these guys will do is the first thing is [assume] it's a guy. If you play really well they think you are a guy and they [you] are lying. And then when you start speaking on the mike and I go 'I'm a girl' they just shut up. 'Girls can't play CS', you know. They start going 'you girls should go and do girly stuff. Like cooking, cleaning.' Stuff like that. So I get really angry sometimes.

Succeeding in a male forum provided a sense of achievement and respect and recognition:

> I feel every time I kill someone I just feel a sense of achievement. I just feel a sense of achievement. All the guys like compliment you. Like you're really good. You feel like oh, I didn't spend all this time just playing this for nothing. People recognize me you know…
>
> I'm really proud of my girls clan. We're actually something in Melbourne. We're actually – people know who we are.

Butterfly exemplifies contradictory discourses and positionings - the clan enables its members to both resist and refuse traditional gender roles, at the same time as providing a forum for intensifying them in other ways:

> you're right at the top, and people are going 'oh the girl's really good, you're pretty good for a girl. You get complimented. You feel really good about yourself. That after so long of practicing on computer games it was not like a waste of time.

At the same time, she was frustrated at the persistence nonetheless of patronizing attitudes:

> But what I really hate is that they always say 'for a girl'. 'She's very good for a girl' And

> when you play a game with them and you win them, they just go ‘oh you’re pretty good for a girl.' So it’s a bit like you can’t succeed with them.

For Butterfly and her team, playing what they saw as an emphatically ‘male’ game and beating their male competitors on their terms, killing efficiently was essential, and linked closely to their sense of achievement and self worth, and to their right to be present in the heavily masculine atmosphere and population of the LAN. While much of their pleasure and sense of achievement was clearly linked to heterosexual normativity, and the thrill of competing and being recognized on 'equal terms' in an overridingly male domain, this was not the only reason why they took up, and kept playing, the game. In addition to their very evident satisfaction in beating the boys at their own game, they took pleasure in the game itself, the quickness of responses, their increasing skill level, and the sociality and intellectual engagement entailed in training, practice and review.

CONCLUSION

As Bryce and Rutter note, ‘the most frequently advanced argument concerning the gendered nature of computer gaming relates to the representation and consumption of game content.’ [6] In this study, boys as well as girls in the school students group were confident and experienced users of *the Sims*, with its emphasis on the traditionally feminine sphere of domestic space, although they used that space differently, in ways reflective of Jenkins’ distinction between risk taking and care taking [15], [3]. It suggested that while there were clearly practices that good gamers utilized to develop expertise, specifically gendered practices could not so easily be identified. Rather, players’ investment in specific games, and their attitudes to themselves as successful or disinterested games players, shaped the ways in which they approached the games and used them in broader contexts of identity construction and display.

In seeking to understand more about the ways in which young people’s out of school learnings and experiences around computer games might be utilized in the curriculum using ICTs in ways hospitable to both boys and girls, it is important to attend not just to the practices on display, but to issues of identity, purpose and social context in order to promote interest, flexibility and expertise. The study of young male and female gamers across these two very specific sites underlines the socially situated nature of play, in relation to both classroom and games activity. where relationships, contexts and purposes flowing across both on and offline play shape the practices entailed in the students’ discussion and activities, and the ways they engage with each other and the games. Understandings drawn from the observation of successful girl gamers suggest expertise is not just a matter of specific skills, strategies and familiarity, but is more broadly located within the complex dynamics of in- and out-of-school discourses and contexts that need to be factored in to the construction of gender-equitable pedagogy and curriculum.

In relation to future English curriculum and technology, the study suggested ways forward in implementing the study and utilisation of technology. It lends support to the need to focus not just on texts and technology per se, but also on the ways in which these are used and aligned with the major adolescent project of identity. This study suggests the need to attend more broadly to such matters in considering how we might plan curriculum across the school that most usefully supports all students to become critical and effective users of technology.

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[ii] Psuedonyms are are used for all participants and places