

# Gender in Play:

## Mapping a Girls' Gaming Club

**Nicholas Taylor**  
York University  
4700 Keele Street  
Toronto, ON, Canada  
nttaylor@rogers.com

**Jennifer Jenson**  
York University  
4700 Keele Street  
Toronto, ON, Canada  
jjenson@edu.yorku.ca

**Suzanne de Castell**  
Simon Fraser University  
8888 University Drive,  
Burnaby, BC, Canada  
decaste@sfu.ca

### ABSTRACT

To better understand boys' privilege and girls' educational disadvantage with regard to video games, this presentation aims to challenge the ways girl gamers are rendered invisible by gaming communities, researchers, and designers. Drawing from audiovisual research of a girls' gaming club at an elementary school in Toronto, this paper explores the micro-interactions of a gaming session between five girls which is interrupted when two boys enter the scene and try to hijack their play. Using the MAP (Multimodal Application Program, developed by Suzanne de Castell and Jennifer Jenson) tool to visually chart and analyze the co-ordinated reactions of the girls as they put down their controllers and hold their bodies immobile during the boys' disruption, this paper explores the tenuous relationship to video games these girls enjoy, even within a space ostensibly devoted to their play.

### Author Keywords

gender, education, ethnography, social contexts

### CHARTING GENDER AND GAMING

Digital games have long been recognized as "boys' toys", artifacts of a masculinized culture heavily invested in the performance and display of technological mastery. While some recent ethnographic work [6, 2] sees a growing acceptance of girl gamers, the production and consumption of games remains largely the domain of men and boys.

This paper explores the capacities of a multi-modal analysis of gendered gameplay for generating insights into the material and discursive conditions through which girls remain only marginal participants in gaming culture. Employing the MAP (Multimodal Analysis Program) tool to code an audio-visual clip in which two boys transgress on a space ostensibly dedicated cultivating and collecting data on girls' gaming, this paper looks to the ways participants co-ordinate boys' "ownership" of game technologies through their gestures and postures as well as speech acts. The "semiotic scores" charting participants' verbal and non-verbal communications afford a glimpse into how their embodied performances of participants in a

school-based ethnographic study of gendered play work to enact a discourse around digital games in which girls have only a tenuous claim to gaming technologies, the sites of their play, and the multimodal competencies they afford.

Concerns around a gender gap around access to and consumption of games have been in play in journalistic and academic accounts of gaming for over a decade, gaining formal recognition with the publication of Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins' edited volume *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. Among its other contributions to the emergent field of study, the volume offers insights into the ways games and gameplay are tooled so as to maintain boys' privileged access: Jenkins looks at adventure games as digitally-remediated "boys spaces", while de Castell and Bryson claim that the push for "girl games" at the time (and continuing to this day), far from offering girls equitable grounds on which to participate in gaming culture, discursively de-limits girls' access to games by deliberately re-invoking essentialized notions of "what girls want" [8, 13]. These approaches see games, as Wajzman [25] says of computer technologies in general, as "always already" masculinized through discourses that affirm men and boys' "natural" proclivities for digital games.

This becomes an urgent concern as games are increasingly recruited as educational resources. Games have gained growing attention both for their applications as deliberately pedagogical tools [9, 16, 20] and for the technological and multimodal competencies cultivated through their play [11, 22]. As games grow in their capacity to provide early and sustained experiences with multimodal literacies, and are brought into classrooms and homes as educational resources with curricular relevance (through initiatives such as MIT's Education Arcade, as well as Simon Fraser University's Simulation and Advanced Gaming Environments for Learning), girls' marginalization from gaming culture may become a significant barrier to educational equity both in and outside the classroom [14]. Equitable access to these emerging educational tools depends in part on a rigorous examination of the conditions through which games and

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gaming systems become and continue to be masculinized technologies.

Recent quantitative research, such as a 2004 report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, has suggested that the gender disparity in game play has largely disappeared [18]. However, Jenson and de Castell (2004) argue that such claims may be at least partially manufactured through methodological and rhetorical techniques that gloss over crucial considerations: the amount of leisure time available to males and females, the commitment demanded by different types of games, and the kinds of technologies men and women use to play, for instance. Jenson and de Castell caution against such techniques that equate, for instance, the social, attentional, and temporal demands of *Solitaire* with *Everquest*, or that presume “bored housewives” (a discursive category said to make up 65% of the on-line casual gaming market) share the same interests and competencies as “hardcore” gamers [1].

Several recent ethnographic studies into gender and gameplay – such as the Education, Gender and Gaming study from which this paper draws – have begun to explore the socio-cultural considerations that these larger statistics-driven accounts tend to ignore. In particular, studies reported by Carr [5], Taylor [24], and Bryce and Rutter [3] as well as Jenson and de Castell [14], chart the material and discursive conditions of gendered play while at the same time paying deliberate and sustained attention to recording and analyzing the experiences of female gamers. The focus and methodology of these ethnographies vary, but they share a concern with working against the tendency for game marketing strategies, player communities, the male-dominated game industry, and journalistic and academic accounts of gaming to render girl gamers “invisible.” Taylor, for instance, devotes a chapter in *Play between worlds* to recounting the experiences and perspectives of hardcore female *Everquest* gamers; she sees in this an intervention into the ongoing construction within much games studies literature of the imagined gamer as a straight white male, where often, as she says, “women and girls playing what are typically defined as masculine games are considered simply exceptions, data points that are outliers to be written off” [24].

Alongside attempts to make visible the experiences of girls and women who *do* play, these studies share an understanding of gender not as a “politically neutral” set of biologically-determined characteristics, but as “power asymmetries, exclusions and constraints” enacted across the social landscapes of gaming – an understanding which might point to the limits of textual exegesis in locating the reasons for girls’ marginalization from gaming culture [3]. Seen in this light, girls and boys’ gameplay preferences – both stated and observed – are seen contingent upon their access to certain types of games and the “appropriateness” of particular games to hetero-normative notions of masculinity and femininity. This notion troubles ongoing attempts, both commercial (with recent games such as

*Barbie Horse Adventure: Wild Horse Rescue*) and academic (such as Sheri Graner-Ray’s *Gender Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market* [12]), to read preferences and play styles as reflections of the immutable differences between males and females. As Carr suggests, “preferences” must be read alongside the economic, social, and cultural processes that shape girls’ and boys’ gaming experiences; often, if given the chance to play games outside of their previous experience, players’ stated preferences will change [6].

### The “Education, Gender and Gaming” (EGG) Project

Rooted in a socio-cultural understanding of gender, these ethnographic studies position games and the social contexts of their play as sites where gendered discourses around technology, leisure, and the negotiation of public space are at work. As this understanding implies, being a “gamer” is a far more acceptable subject position for males than for females. Situated alongside these ethnographies, and drawing from both the conceptual framework and audio-visual record of Jenson and de Castell’s Education, Gender and Gaming project, the following analysis of a short audio-video clip demonstrates some of the tensions that can arise in a context where girls whose previous experiences with games may have been contingent upon the desires of their male relations are given greater opportunity to gain competencies and familiarity with games in a space ostensibly free from disruption by boys.

The EGG study, divided into three research phases, created a series of gaming clubs carried out in a local Greater Toronto Area school, where small groups of students were videotaped playing games. They also filled out surveys. The first phase of research, from October 2004 to June 2005, involved separate girls and boys gaming clubs, operating on separate days and co-ordinated and recorded by a female and male teaching assistant, respectively.<sup>1</sup> The second phase of school-based research began in January 2006 and lasted until the end of May, for a total of 11 hour-long sessions held weekly in the school’s library. This mixed-gender gaming club, facilitated and recorded by a single research assistant, involved 5 girls and 10 boys. The third phase is ongoing.

This particular exploration of gender and play looks at audio-visual data recorded during the first phase of the EGG study, in which 3 groups of girls at an elementary school in the Greater Toronto Area each participated in 12 weekly gaming sessions held either during lunch hours or after school. Consoles consisted of Gamecube, Gameboy Advance (GBA), Playstation 2, and Xbox titles rated by the Entertainment Software Review Board (ESRB) as suitable for all audiences. The audio-visual data recorded during these sessions was later divided into smaller (30 second to 2 minute) audio-visual clips which were textually coded to chart various forms of physical and verbal interaction around social play: when teasing, laughter, and “help”

happened (either solicited or unsolicited), when participants usurped each others' controls, when and how players narrowed or expanded the physical proximity between them, and where and when attention and pleasurable engagement seemed to be most "in play," to name just a few.

The clip that this paper discusses involves four girls gathering around a gaming console, which along with the television, is off-screen to the viewer/reader's right (Figure 1). The girls are playing a racing game, *Need for Speed: Underground*; they seem to be organizing a multiplayer game among themselves. One girl plays GBA as they get organized. As the girl with the GBA stands up, two boys enter from the opposite direction of the television. One boy asks why the girls have not yet gotten *Underground 2* (the latest game in the *Need for Speed* franchise), and the girl holding the GBA seems to shrug before sitting back down. As the girl closest to the television gestures towards the console, the boys walk out of the camera frame (towards the console) in an apparent attempt to re-configure the game. They are interrupted by the girl furthest away from the television who, after several seconds, leans towards them in her seat and seems to ask that they leave, at which point the boys walk away from the console, past the girls, and offscreen in the direction from whence they came.



**Figure 1:** "How come you guys didn't get *Underground 2* yet?"

#### AUDIO-VISUAL DATA, AUDIOVISUAL TOOLS

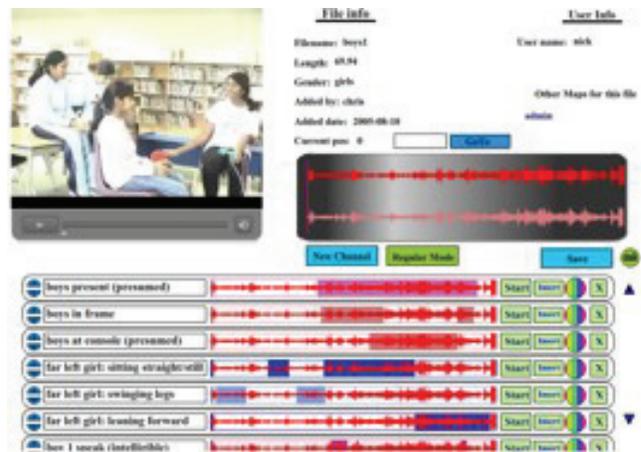
As my explanation of the events in this short audio-visual clip readily demonstrates, textual descriptions of interactions among participants in an ethnographic study – however detailed – are opaque at best. Textual description, as Kress and van Leeuwen note, collapses the "multiple articulations" through which meanings in a given context are communicated – gesture, intonation, pitch, proximity – into the "double articulation" (form and content) of written language [17]. Textual recording and analysis has traditionally been seen as central to the "doing" of

ethnography, even as researchers confront the epistemological reductionism inherent to exclusively textual accounts of ethnographic experience. James Clifford, for instance, in his introduction to *Writing Culture*, says of the volume's collected works of unconventional ethnographic writing that they "do not claim that ethnography is 'only literature'". They do insist it is always writing" [7].

The increased accessibility and affordability – not to mention mobility - of digital video equipment and editing software allows ethnographers to attend to the kinds of non-verbal communications and contextualization difficult, if not impossible, to record textually through fieldnotes or transcripts. However, while there has been a growing recognition of the epistemological affordances of audio-visual research, particularly for studies of communication in educational contexts [15, 21], the analysis, representation and reporting of audio-visual research still largely remains rooted in textual practices<sup>ii</sup> [10].

#### A MAP is Worth a Thousand Words

The "Charting Emerging Educational Discourses" (CEED) project (2002-2004), a study of pedagogic communications in non-formal learning contexts led by Suzanne de Castell and Jennifer Jenson, pushed the methodological affordances of digital audio-visual technologies a step further, asking how audio-visual analysis can be carried out and reported on using primarily audio-visual tools. MAP (the Multimodal Analysis Program), programmed by students at Simon Fraser University and York University, is a software application that mounts and plays a selected audio-visual clip above a series of channels, similar in look (and, by extension, in how it "reads") to a musical score (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** MAP interface

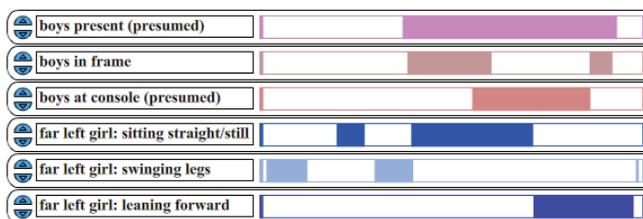
Each user-defined channel represents a distinctive communicative mode and/or source of significance in the clip: a participant's hand gesture, another participant's

laughter, or physical contact between participants, for instance. Users add events to each (differently-coloured) channel as instances of that particular mode occur in the clip. The result, as users create, define, and populate numerous channels, is a “semiotic score” which charts interactions across the various forms of communication that users have identified as significant in the audio-visual record. This multimodal coding of video data means researchers can not only attend to a range communicative modes, but also to how these communicative modes are co-ordinated across a period of time – allowing for multiple interpretations of the same interaction.

In making visible the ways we conceptually organize and make meaning of audio-visual data, MAP affords a degree of reflexivity not readily available through primarily textual techniques of analyzing and reporting on ethnographic research. A means not only for coding an interaction, but for representing the coder’s own process of attending to what she or he deems significant in that interaction, MAP allows researchers to “try to be aware of how selections are made and to reflect on our own subjectivity” [19]. The coding program can be seen therefore as a tool for mapping a researcher’s own biases, presumptions, and interests. This notion is played out in the following analysis; exploring an instance where two boys usurp girls’ play represents my own attempt as a long-time gamer to learn – or “unlearn” maybe – the conditions by which gaming technologies, cultures, and physical gaming contexts are *still* masculinized, despite the increased reports of more girls playing.

### A “semiotic score” in three movements

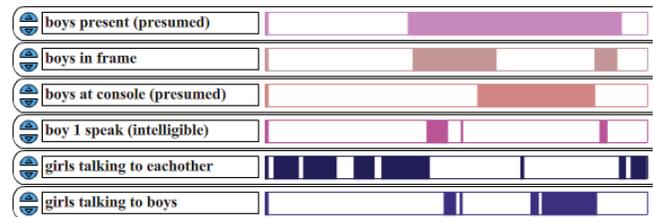
In my “mapping” of this particular EGG clip (titled “Boys1”), I focused on three separate but overlapping interpretations: the first looks at the actions of the girl on the far left of the frame who asks the boys leave; the second charts instances of speech among the girls and then between the girls and the two boys; and the third is my interpretation of the interaction as a whole – my “story” based both on my coding and on EGG participants’ survey responses.



**Figure 3:** Mapping gesture – the overlap between “boys present” and bodily immobility

Figure 3 highlights the co-ordination between the boys’ presence in the frame and the girl on the far left’s bodily immobility. During the first half of the clip, “far left girl” is swinging her legs and at one point, laughing out loud as the

girls get ready to play. Both her movement and vocalization suggest pleasure and/or anticipation, ending abruptly as the boys enter the frame (presumably at the same point at which they enter her field of vision). She does not move again until she leans forward into the space between her and the boys at the console, apparently to ask the boys to leave, and she does not lean back until they leave the frame. Although the audio quality makes it difficult to discern *what* she says to the boys, *how* she says it – tense posture, her earlier leg-swinging stopped – suggests her possible anxiety, or frustration, or both, as she attempts maybe to re-establish the rules of the ostensibly girls-only gaming club.



**Figure 4:** Mapping speech – no talk among the girls during the boys’ disruption

Another “mapping” of this clip charts, in broad outline, the girls’ verbal interactions – to whom they speak and when (Figure 4). Again, the audio in the clip is too poor to allow for an analysis of what is said, aside from “boy 1’s” initial question (“How come you guys didn’t get *Underground 2* yet?”), but what is deemed significant here is the absence of verbal exchanges *between* the girls during the period the boys are first in the frame and then off-frame at the console. Lacking during the boys’ presence is any of the “friendly banter” frequent during female participants’ play that Jenson and de Castell describe in their report on this same phase of the EGG study [14].

Though attending to different communicational modes, both of these “semiotic scores” suggest a level of anxiety among the female participants as the boys first intrude on, and then disrupt what is intended to be a girls-only site for gameplay. The girls’ anxiety, read through their immobility and silence, is perhaps indicative of the tensions that arise when this space, dedicated to their competency-building with masculinized technologies, is compromised. The boys’ intrusion temporarily re-establishes what EGG participants’ surveys suggest is the “normal” social configuration around gaming, where, in a ludic twist on a classic Marxist formulation, males own and control the means of play. Surveys continually describe girls’ participation in domestic gaming contexts as consisting in either spectatorship or a form of highly-contingent play, where male relatives and friends take over controllers at the first signs of difficulty [14]. As the interpretation offered in Figure 1.4 depicts, the speed at which the two boys usurp the girls’ session – the girls seem to be in the process of setting up the game when they enter – suggests a degree of entitlement on the part of

the boys towards games that accords with participants' descriptions of play at home.



**Figure 5:** Mapping a story across modes

Where Figures 3 and 4 represent two attempts at attending to events within particular modes (speech and gesture), Figure 5 represents an attempt to more deliberately explicate a “story” (by no means a definitive one) around this interaction by piecing together certain events in the clip. In this interpretation, the boys disrupt the girls’ preparations for a multiplayer racing game session. As the girl playing GBA (“gameboy girl”, in Figure 5) stands, presumably to switch her GBA for a console controller, the boys enter the frame and “boy 1” asks why they’re not playing the newer version of the game – a speech act that asserts his superior knowledge of games and possibly, by extension, his status as a “gamer”, while at the same time undermining that of the girls. Figure 1 depicts the moment in the clip at which “girl on right” motions at the console, as coded in Figure 5, a gesture which seemingly invites the boys to re-configure the console. The boys walk offscreen in the direction of the console and remain there until “far left girl” leans forward and asks they leave.

The anxiety and uneasiness among the female participants by the boys’ disruption handled differently by “far left girl”, who takes issue with their presence and asserts the rules of the girls-only space, and “girl at console”, whose gesture towards the console seems to sanction, if not invite, the boys’ interference and effectively relegates the girls to spectators, not active participants, in the play. Possibly at work here is a negotiation around the gendered notion of play and its connection to spectatorship. In their responses, most female EGG participants say they “play” games, and yet when asked to describe what this play entails, report that they almost exclusively play with male relatives. As Jenson and de Castell report, at odds with these claims is the degree of unfamiliarity with gaming hardware and software that female gaming club participants initially demonstrated. This discrepancy between their survey responses and their apparent lack of comfort with the kinds of technical and literate competencies associated with gaming – setting up game consoles, mastering controls – suggests either a degree of “ventriloquation” in their survey responses or a conception of gaming which, quite unlike their male counterparts, sees spectatorship as legitimate form of participation in social play.

That males and females might perceive spectatorship, play and the connection between the two quite differently is

supported by my own tentative study of a campus arcade [23]. In this pilot study, I distributed short surveys to and observed male and female participants as they interacted with gaming machines and each other in the public space of York University’s Campus Cove, a centrally-located combination pool hall/LAN café/arcade parlour. In their surveys, male participants repeatedly expressed a conception of spectatorship as something to do while waiting for their next turn; as occurring in between, not constitutive of, social play in a public space. Conversely, the few female survey respondents (participants were overwhelmingly male) did seem to consider their spectatorship as a credible – and, based on my limited observations, exclusive – form of participation in the site. Whether spectatorship and its status as an (il)legitimate form of participation in social gaming is consistently divided upon gender lines across different (public, domestic) gaming contexts is beyond the scope of the studies this paper draws from; but it seems this division does in fact play out in both my limited observations of a university arcade as well as the EGG project.

Placed alongside these considerations, it is possible to read “girl at console’s” gesture as sanctioning the temporary return to “play as usual” as described in surveys, where girls’ participation is characterized spectatorship, and by periods of play contingent upon the desires of their male friends, relatives and peers. Conversely, “far left girl’s” words to the boys as she leans forward tensely seem to assert the rules of the girls-only space (in the temporary absence of the research assistant) and in doing so she defends her claim to the kind of sustained, competency-building play which the research site is ostensibly dedicated to and which seems to be, for the participants in this study, still largely the domain of men and boys.<sup>iii</sup>

### Performing play

As Butler [4] describes, the notion of gender as a dichotomous set of biologically-determined characteristics separating women from men discursively masks the ways political, economic, and social relations unfavorable, and often hostile to women are played out across cultural contexts. Rather than read into this clip from the EGG data immutable truths about gender – for instance, that it illustrates how boys are naturally aggressive and agonistic, and girls naturally passive – this discussion sees the “mapped” silences, speech acts, postures, and gestures of participants as performances of a discourse around gaming (and digital technologies more generally) that positions girls as somehow both deficient and disinterested in the competencies, knowledges, and practices associated with digital play. The EGG gaming club marks a deliberate intervention into this discourse by allowing for participants’ sustained play over weeks and months as they gain familiarity, comfort, and proficiency with gaming technologies. It represents (ideally) a safe site for the cultivation of subjectivities that may not normally be

permissible in their everyday lives where being a “gamer” may be at odds with a hetero-normative gendered identity. If the EGG club is a space dedicated to the temporary suspension of a discourse which positions boys as the “natural” owners of games, gaming technologies and gaming spaces and girls as only marginal participants in the practices and knowledges surrounding play, then the mappings offered here – charting across various modalities two boys’ transgression into this ostensibly girls-only space – depict a moment where this gender order is re-established.

To borrow from Butler’s formulation of gender as “performative”, constituted through the “mundane ways in bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds” work towards the maintenance of normative social relations, the semiotic scores shown here depict the girls’ almost immediate return to the kinds of performances that, as their surveys suggest, characterize their “play” at home – ceding control(ers) to boys and taking up positions as spectators. If gender performances collectively constitute a “strategy” whose goal is “cultural survival”, then the girls’ anxious reactions to the intrusion clearly represents how “unsafe” girls’ desires and pleasures around gaming may be within a “compulsory hetero-normative gender order” [4].<sup>iv</sup>

## CONCLUSION

These considerations mark an attempt to “play” with the conceptual affordances offered by a multimodal analysis of audio-visual data taken from a project dedicated to the cultivation of girls’ gaming competencies. A methodological concern with charting non-verbal interactions, and a conceptual concern around exploring the material, embodied conditions of girls’ marginalization not only converge, but are complementary. Moving beyond accounts of gaming which seek explanations for gender disparity in gameplay in girls vs. boys’ textual preferences, or worse, which discursively explain away this disparity, requires attention to how gendered discourses are enacted and subverted in the physical contexts of game play. To do this may require research tools for the analysis and reporting of ethnographic data which – like MAP – allow researchers to see and hear, not just read and write.

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<sup>i</sup> As Jenson and de Castell (2006) report, considerations around "addressivity" - who asks questions of who, and why this matters - are too often lacking in reports of gender and gameplay (Jenson and de Castell 6).

<sup>ii</sup> The discussion presented here is a case in point: originally a multimedia presentation in which the audience was able to watch the audio-visual clip, this print format, while perhaps enabling a more in-depth analysis, is limited to only textual descriptions and still images.

<sup>iii</sup> The vulnerability of this claim, even within the deliberate space of the EGG gaming club, is poignantly illustrated in two successive clips from the audio-visual record in which the same two boys return shortly after they leave. Two of the girls pass off their controllers to the boy and shortly after "far left girl", who had earlier asked they leave, nervously/sheepishly points at the video camera.

<sup>iv</sup> How these performances of gender intersect with race and ethnicity is a pressing question, one which cannot adequately be addressed in this first round of EGG research as almost all of the participants self-identify as southeast Asian, meaning there are little grounds for comparison with participants from other cultural backgrounds.