Girls and Gaming: Gender Research, "Progress" and the Death of Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about the persistent absence of critical interpretation in work focused on gender and gameplay. Since its beginnings, research (and resulting practice) in this area has moved little if at all from the early work in the path-breaking Cassells and Jenkins volume dedicated to girls and gaming. In the currently very well-regarded and oft-cited volume on "girl-friendly" game design, Sheri Graner-Ray re-instates the gamut of gender stereotypes by now so familiar as to have become "canonical" for the field. In this paper we illustrate some theoretical, research, and practice dilemmas, and, drawing upon sophisticated interpretive work in gender studies and on socio-cultural approaches to research, we propose some tactics for re-thinking the very terms and conditions of this by now clearly resilient orthodoxy about "what girls like best," arguing that until we are able to be surprised by its findings, we can be fairly confident that games studies research into gender accomplishes little beyond re-instating and further legitimating inequality of access, condition and opportunity. This is no game: no fun, and no fair.

Author Keywords

Gender, gameplay, research, sociology, game culture

INTRODUCTION

> *If someone returns from work one night and announces he has accidentally run over a cat on the way home, that's one thing. If he comes home night after night having accidentally run over one cat after another, its reasonable to question his affection for cats, and to dispute the extent to which this can be rightly called an 'accident' anymore.* D.W. Hamlyn (class notes, c. 1977)

This paper is about an apparent inability so frequent as to appear no longer "accidental," in current work on gender and gameplay: an apparent inability to theorize, analyze or interpret gender research in which "equity" takes center stage. This is a question that has been stewing for us for quite a long time. Some years ago, similarly baffled at the apparent inability of otherwise well informed, theoretically sophisticated educational researchers and scholars working on a "gender equity" committee to muster any but the most outdated and soundly-critiqued conceptions of gender equity as "equal numbers of males and females in all subjects," it began to dawn on us that something was going persistently and systematically wrong with work on this issue [1]. Now to be clear, it's not that there is no theoretically insightful, radical, intellectually exciting ground being broken in gender studies more generally: for example, brilliant work in queer theory from the likes of Eve Sedgewick, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Donna Haraway amply testifies to the advances in conceptualization that can be and have been made: our puzzlement is about what happens in the move from theory to application, whether in sociology, in gender-based design practices, in gender-based research, in gender equity policy, in game studies or in any other arena of "progressive" gender-centric practice.

In this paper, we mobilize some of that insightful and innovative theoretical work to interrogate the apparent "mistakes" of contemporary work on education, gender and gameplay as a means to re-consider deficiencies as E-ficiencies, as deeply-rooted forms of productive "bio-power" [6] which induce a perception of the constructed and artificial as "natural" and essential, in such a way as to render any kind of profound inquiry inconceivable and, in this way, systematically to disable critical inquiry. A useful beginning is with Butler's analysis of gender performativity, which invites us to distinguish between what appears to be an essential, authentic or inner "truth" of gender from daily performances of gender conventions that, through their repeated embodiment in actions and self-representations, make those conventions, that artifice, appear both necessary and natural. Echoing earlier arguments by feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith that explanations invoking "womens' *roles*" are in actuality ideological "moves" which reify conventions and impose upon women expectations and obligations which a feminist sociology ought instead to be critically exposing, Butler writes that "gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not.

As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" [2].

On this view, what the repetition of conventional gender performances accomplishes is hegemony. So seen, this repetition is far indeed from being a "mistake," a unhappy "accident" of scholarship gone wrong: rather, from this perspective what we are looking at are the deepest epistemic roots of scholarly inquiry in a culturally extremely important area. This would be a different vision altogether, a vision of something working very well indeed, working so well, in fact, that even experienced and accomplished researchers find themselves, ourselves, steering to aporia, mesmerized. Repetition signals, then, not an accident, but something quite purposeful, a deeply structured process which naturalizes convention and makes it impossible to see or hear anything other than an 'inner truth' of gender that little seems capable of dislodging when discussions move from the esoteric domains of high theory into applied areas like social, technological, and educational research, policy, and practice.

COOPERATION VS COMPETITION: IS FLORENCE JOYNER COMPETITIVE? OR IS SHE NOT A "WOMAN?"

It has become a timeworn orthodoxy in discussions of "girl-friendly" game design that girls like to co-operate in their gameplay, whereas boys like to compete [3]. What is far less clear is what "competition" and "cooperation" mean? Whose conceptualizations of these alternatives are running this show? In the work we have done observing and interviewing girls about how they play, and what they like and dislike in video and computer gameplay, it soon becomes clear that the *very idea* of "competition," for example, is both gendered and contestable. If we think we know what competition means, then we probably have not observed, analyzed, or talked to very many girls playing games. It's commonplace that many female athletes, for example, are highly competitive, so why would we not expect girls who play computer games to be "competitive"? It's time we expended some intellectual effort de-coding competition, before going blithely on to invoke the term as a marker of gendered play preferences. We obviously do not refer by this term to the structure of the games played, since many games girls like are "competitive" in their structure. In "Super Monkey Ball," for example, you have to fly more accurately, race faster, rollover more bananas and so on, than your fellow players. Even if you are playing solo, you are challenged by the game itself to get the highest score, even if it's only relative to your own last highest score. Wherever there is scoring, there is competition of at least this kind. Is there any videogame game that doesn't have some form of competition inbuilt?

In fact, of course, many girls do like, even "love" competitive gameplay. Many girls say they love the same kinds of competitive gameplay boys do: fighting, beating, racing against one another, building higher, faster, deeper, longer, accumulating the most points, knocking out opponents, all that. Many other girls seem to love to play with others, but their competition takes a rather different,

possibly gender-specific, form what one of our research assistants designated "benevolent competition." When girls in our study play in this benevolently competitive way, they are still very much "competing," however, they are also supporting, encouraging and even helping their playmates to succeed in the game. The point is that they *are* competing. They are playing competitively in the ways enabled and supported for girls. That means only that these girls, and girls like them, are competing in ways socially regulated as appropriate to and acceptable for them "as girls." If their competition took the same form as that of their brothers, this would be cause for trouble on all sides. What this doesn't do--- and unless we already attain equality of access and experience, never can do – is tell us about "gender differences in girl-friendly game design" [9]. If the very terms of our calculations, our axiomatic concepts and foundational practices, embody and express and re-cite hegemonic rules, we will continue to define for women and girls, activities, dispositions, aspirations and accomplishments in the terms of what these are and mean for boys and men. The problem is one of terms and turf. If we define the matter from the outset in terms that describe only what happens on male turf, we are unlikely to illuminate much about the situation as it is possible for women. As Butler elsewhere explained, the state accords rights to those that it then goes on to represent. This is "always already" a hegemonic performance, however worthy or "progressive" our intentions.

Re-Citing Gender Research

That research "data" no less embody naturalized hegemonic conventions about gender should of course come as no surprise. So why does it? If pressed, even the most entrenched gender essentialist of girl-game theorists would acknowledge that this must of course be the case, since research is itself a socially situated practice, so must therefore be the "data" it elicits. In the face of this intransient fact, what have we done in practice to take acknowledged epistemic bias into account in such a way that we might make it possible for our research to "surprise" us [7,10]? In *Tricks of the Trade*, research methodologist Anselm Strauss argues persuasively for the usefulness of having richer "*contra*-factual possibilities" inbuilt in our very research design, from contexts to characters to questions. So how is it that we appear to forget, for example, the need for any substantive consideration of prior experience in studies of what games "girls like best," [4,11,12] or most typically choose to create [5,8].

Its by now surely well-understood that the responses people give to questions about what and how they like to play best, necessarily vary as a function of the situation they are occurrently in, what they take the intent of these questions to be, who is asking them---all of these things reconstitute and reconfigure what the question "is" for informants', and shape the range and nature of the responses they will give in the moment. This common enough realization has had a hard time impacting upon gender-focused research, however. A

thorough application of Bakhtin's insightful analysis of "addressivity"; and "dialogicality" would go a long way towards redressing the studied naiveté of what remain resiliently stereotypical research "findings" about girls and gaming. But improving the intellectual quality of gender-focused research is only a part, and perhaps the lesser part, of what is at stake here.

Re-Citing Stereotypical Practice

The main problem with flawed research is that it can and does drive flawed practice. Going back to the cat-astophic driver earlier introduced, neither better night-vision lenses, nor new and improved headlights, nor any other intervention directed at improving his ability to see cats on the road could prove effective if the real problem was a bad "tic" about cats and a deep-seated desire to rid the world of their kind. In a not –dissimilar way, the when "girl-friendly" principles derived from flawed research which forgets itself as gender- performance and reads itself as an "inner truth" of gender, drive "girl-friendly" intervention efforts to engage girls with game play, or with game design, or with games as a route to computer programming, those interventions will themselves structurally re-cite and re-entrench the very inequities they seek to re-mediate. And we should not be surprised if "gender equity interventions" of that persistently if unwittingly conservative kind are those most highly and prestigiously funded. We cannot look to practical work, no matter how well supported, whose very foundations are flawed, to remediate problems that remain undetected and therefore unacknowledged from the start. A good first step would be to resuscitate *interpretation* as an indispensable tool for gender research, to un-learn the stereotypical assumptions, and challenge covertly stereotyped concepts (such as "competition") that have thus far driven research in this area, and, by these simple means, to begin to make it possible to discover something *other* than that which we always already 'know' about girls and video gameplay, and to be *surprised* about "what girls like best.

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