

Chapter LII

Gamers, Gender, and Representation

Diane Carr

University of London, UK

Caroline Pelletier

University of London, UK

ABSTRACT

The issue of gender reoccurs in debates about the introduction of computer games into formal learning contexts. There is a fear that girls will be alienated rather than engaged by games in the classroom. There is also concern over sexist imagery, and thus about representational aspects of computer games. In this chapter, particular aspects of these issues are addressed in turn. The authors explore the issue of gender and gendered game preferences, in relation to the cultural framing of the gaming audience. Attention is then directed at the issue of representation, with a consideration of the tensions between representation, meaning, and playability. These issues are considered primarily through perspectives drawn from media studies, and with reference to recent work from the emerging field of computer game studies.

GAMERS, GENDER, AND REPRESENTATION

There is a growing willingness to consider the use of commercially produced computer games in classrooms, yet there is also lingering and understandable concern about the popular associations—or “cultural baggage”—that such games

might bring with them to formal learning contexts. One persistent concern is that the introduction of games into classrooms might alienate female students. A related concern hinges on imagery in games, and issues of representation. In this chapter, which is based on a colloquium article first published in the *British Journal of Education and Technology* (Carr, 2007), we will discuss

gender and the gaming audience, and gendered representation in games in turn, while drawing on research from within the field of game studies.¹

Computer games in the classroom, it has been proposed, have the potential to motivate and re-engage disenfranchised male students. These same games, it is feared, may alienate female students (BECTA, 2001; Ellis, Heppell, Kirriemuir, Krotoski, & McFarlane, 2006). Frequently, in discussions of this issue, attention is paid to the structural or generic features of games, and the links between these factors and the purported preferences of gendered user-subjects. Here, rather than discussing “what games girls like”, we would like to draw attention to the notion of the “gamer”, and the cultural, social, and economic construction of gaming audiences. These factors—at least as much as the particular attributes of specific games or genres—continue to influence how players and especially non-players regard games, and their relationship to games.

Concern about the representation of bodies in commercial computer games has also been a feature of debates about the introduction of commercial games into classrooms. According to Ellis et al. (2006, p. 25), research “indicates that both students and teachers are sensitive to the cultural representations in games and believe that they can reinforce stereotypes and have other similar negative effects.” Such concerns are warranted. Questionable bodies in fictional forms, popular culture, or games should not be ignored. This is not a trivial issue, yet neither is it straightforward, because the playability of games complicates attempts to account for the meaning of games and representations in games.

In this chapter, our aim is to contribute to debates on games in classrooms, player motivation, and problematic imagery, by drawing attention to the work that is being done in recent computer game studies on relevant issues; by situating issues of gender and player engagement in cultural contexts, and by considering the representation of bodies in games in a “media-specific” manner.

GAMING CULTURE AND GAMES IN THE CLASSROOM

Discussions about gender and computer games in learning contexts tend to frame both players and games in particular ways. It might be assumed, for example, that children are the primary audience for games (which is not always the case), and that males play more than females, which is not necessarily the case (Krotoski, 2004).

Scholars and educators have focused on the figure of the young, female (non-) player, in part because of concerns about girls’ lack of engagement with mathematics, the sciences, and technology. There has been a tendency to propose remedial steps, such as the engineering of “games for girls” or further research into girls’ gaming preferences (see various contributions to Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). The implication in some reviews of this research is that insufficient “games for girls” are available—and that “games for girls” and “games for boys” are very different entities (see Gorriz & Medina, 2000; Gurer & Camp, 2002; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2000). Due to rapid shifts in the commercial games market, even recent research into these areas is dating fast. It is not the case now (if, indeed, it ever was) that commercially available games fall neatly into “male” and “female” camps.

In the decades since computer games arrived in arcades, and then homes (in numerous genres, on a range of hardware), the cultural framing of game play has continued to shift. Certain genres achieve visibility or even notoriety while others, such as sports management games, receive little in the way of media or academic attention, despite their being among the most played of all genres (ESA, 2006). Similarly, clichéd depictions of gamers (the “alienated male adolescent”; the shy bearded “geek”) persist, while other players, such as the numerous middle-aged female players of online puzzle games, for instance, have never caught the media’s attention or fired the public imagination to the same degree.

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