Chapter 102
From the "Damsel in Distress" to Girls' Games and Beyond:
Gender and Children's Gaming

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors critically assess the gendered nature of the products developed by the computer gaming industry. The chapter takes a historiographical approach to examining the nature of children's video and computer games as a type of toy that immerses children into current gender stereotypes even as they hold the potential for social change. New ways of bridging the gap between stereotypes and change is explored through a virtual world for children. In addition to an introductory section, the chapter is organized in three main sections: First, the authors place existing computer and video games into a broad and historical context. Second, the chapter takes into consideration feminist critiques of video games for adults. Third, the authors analyze the case of WebkinzWorld, a toy-based social-networking portal offering less gendered video game environments for kids. The authors argue that this mixed method analysis is important not only for computer game designers and marketers who aim to appeal to broad demographics, but also for educators, parents, and caregivers who need to understand the underlying or hidden messages of games for children.

INTRODUCTION: CHILDREN'S GAMES IN CONTEXT

Since the early 1980s with the advent of home computers, video and computer games, and information and communication technologies in general, researchers have sounded the alarm about the gender divide – not enough women employed in the field, technologies designed for men, few women studying in technology-related fields (in spite of increasing numbers of women enrolled in universities generally), hypersexualized and stereotyped female characters in video games, and so on. This lack of appropriate and fair

representation of women in technological fields generally has been well-documented (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Dietz, 1998; Harvey 2011). In this chapter, we ask the question: how has the nature of children's video games evolved in terms of gender? We take the approach that the products (i.e., computer and video games) developed by the game development industry are cultural texts. By taking a historiographical approach to examining the nature of children's video and computer games as a type of toy that immerses children into current gender stereotypes, we consider their potential for social change.

Feminist research in critical media literacy has illustrated how popular culture has worked to re-produce patriarchal power structures and gendered identities. Indeed, this research has highlighted the ways in which history and culture are linked together as part of the same process. Popular culture does more than simply reflect history; cultural texts make history because they are part of social processes and practices. In a similar way, readers of texts (i.e., audiences, gamers, viewers, etc.) interpret and produce meaning from those texts which then become components of history and society. This process is further complicated, as Alvermann et al. (2000) argue, because different people will interpret the same texts in different ways, even when those people apparently share similar cultures or belief systems. However, this complication also provides insight into how children can reinterpret and reinscribe alternative meanings into gendered toys. Similarly, gamers of all ages and genders regularly try to subvert the standard images portrayed by, for example, avatars that are gendered without real reasons for them to be gendered (Hatmaker, 2010; Beavis, 2005; Bryce & Rutter, 2003). Furthermore, as Bryce and Rutter (2003) demonstrate, there is often an oversimplification of arguments regard-ing the gendering of computer games because the full range of such games are not considered. Nonetheless, even though subversion occurs in game play, there is still concern regarding the

effects that the immersive nature of video games has on children before they learn to manipulate such games and to understand the implications of stereotyped characters, images, and storylines.

Computer and video games constitute a form of play through which socialization takes place similar to traditional toys. Children begin to identify toys as being for girls or boys during their pre-school years, and gender roles become entrenched during their teens (Martin, Eisenbud, & Rose, 1995). Toys are ascribed gender roles that fit traditional social norms first by adults who are in charge of marketing toys and second by adults who are caregivers. Even if parents attempt to provide non-gendered play opportunities, once the child leaves home for daycare or school, she or he will quickly learn gendered social norms. Those social norms that designate items such as cars, trains, planes and construction sets as "boys' toys," teach boys to be in control of their environment because they can move and construct buildings and roads. Similarly, "girls' toys," such as dolls and kitchenware, teach girls that they are expected to care and nurture others through car-ing for babies, preparing food and cleaning. As Babcock and Laschever (2009) conclude, such "toycoding … teach[es] girls to subordinate their needs to the needs of others and to teach boys to take charge of their environments" (p.71). Even though young children happily play with any toys available regardless of gender designations, it often does not take long before someone decides that any play that apparently crosses gender norms is inappropriate and the child is either subject to teasing or loses access to that toy.

Researchers have long argued that important human activities occur within play environments (e.g. Huizinga, 1950). Video games and play en-courage children to take chances in permissive, enjoyable and pleasurable settings. As Kinzie and Joseph (2008) put it, "[a] game is an immersive, voluntary and enjoyable activity in which a chal-lenging goal is pursued according to agreed-upon rules. The game provides a safe environment for

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