

Gender, Education, and Video Games

Anna Escofet Roig

University of Barcelona, Spain

M^a José Rubio Hurtado

University of Barcelona, Spain

INTRODUCTION

The scope of this article is to analyze educational multimedia games from a gender perspective.

Our society is changing, moving toward information and communication technologies (Castells, 1997). Schools are not exempt of this change and computers in the classroom begin to be common. This new learning tool needs to be critically evaluated by teachers. The gender construction in the world representations offered by educational multimedia should also be evaluated.

BACKGROUND

Towards the end of the 1990s, an American movement called *girl's games* appeared. This trend studied those multimedia products geared for girls under 14.

The interest in computer games for girls originates from a confluence of interests between the feminist movement that tried to improve women's situation within digital technology, and entrepreneurs of the multimedia sector, that discovered a new market sector for its products in young girls (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998).

Feminist studies are centred on the representation of women in computer games from a triple perspective: as characters (how they are portrayed, to what roles they are attributed, in what scenes they are placed, etc.), as producers (which is the proportion of programmers, illustrators or video game company directors) and as users (which is the design, the contents and the type of interactivity with the game they use). Simultaneously, large computer game firms commission studies concerning young girls' preferences with respect to the characters, colours, activities, game styles, etc.

The first game specifically for girls entitled, *Hawaii High: The Mystery of the Tiki* was produced in 1994 by the company Sanctuary Woods. Although it was not a sales hit, it introduced characteristics (like brilliantly coloured graphics and complex opposing storylines in which values like friendships and social relationships play an important role) that were common to other girl's games of this first generation. But it was not until 1996, when *Barbie Fashion Designer* appeared and sold more than half a million copies in the first two months, that things changed for the games' market for girls. It was seen at that time that software specifically for girls could triumph as one for boys. But not all producers agreed on the same definition for girls' games. Within this label, there coexisted the traditional games in which a girl identifies with the most traditional female norms—like *Mattel* games with *Barbie* as the star—and the “non stereotyped” games (Escofet, Espanya, Herrero, & Rubio, 2000) which were new multimedia products that were designed and produced at the end of the 1990s by companies like *HerInteractive*, *Girl Games*, *Girltech*, and *Purple Moon*. The one characteristic all these companies have in common is that they were managed by women, hired many female staff, and were motivated by the desire to transform gender relationships within American culture and to create a potential new market. In 1997, they signed a deal which was an example of the collaborative style that they followed. This resulted in the creation of *GIRL*, the *Girl Interactive Library*, with the intention of familiarizing girls with the technological market. Its Web page, *Just4girls*, was an important centre of information about its software proposal for girls, that was based on the style of current and personal themes like making decisions concerning family relationships or friendships.

Even though there is a claim by the game industry that they make decisions based on research and that they incorporate female gender findings into their products, the reality is that multimedia games “for girls” present friendly environments where female stereotypes are reinforced. There are industries that have tried to fulfil the lack of software for girls, but although they have very good intentions, they classify as “girl’s games” those that show them interested only in make-up, shopping, and dating. They even include specific make-up products in the packaging of the games. This has been criticized by authors such as Rubin (1999, p. 3), when saying “Viewing girls as motivated primarily by social status and consumerism is just as bad as assuming that all boys will be captivated by violence.”

Many authors will not grant to Barbie, the super-feminine symbol, a possible relevant representation to be made in order to attract girls to the new technologies, a prize that seems too high because it maintains female stereotypes. Authors like Turkle (1995, p. 20) say “computers don’t just do things for us, they do things to us, including to our ways of thinking about ourselves and other people,” and de Castell and Bryson (1998, p. 251) ask us about “Are we producing tools for girls, or are we producing girls themselves ... ?”

Another important criticism is that the “non-competitive relationships” that these games present seem to move away from a sense of ambition and effort, indispensable to occupy leadership positions in the working environment (Eisenberg, 1998).

Not all authors share this negative view. There are others that believe that any use of software programs can increase girl’s interest in technology. This is the view of the industry. Conversely, Beatto (1997) and Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (1998) believe that this type of use can be detrimental to girls. They sustain kids that play with computers spend a lot more time at the computer than those that only use it to do homework. This extra time allows them to develop better skills and the flexibility to experiment with the computer.

Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (1998) analyze *Barbie Fashion Designer’s* success. They sustain that a game that engages girls is a lot more than one with a female character. They conclude by saying that Barbie’s success is related to the outcome of the game, one without a specific goal, converting the

computer in a tool and facilitating that which girls do the most.

In this setting, the girls that play the game are the designers, not Barbie, they are the active protagonists of the game. And this, combined with the types of environment rejected by girls, because of their aggressive content, is the main reason why girls like this game, even though it includes many stereotypes. These authors believe this is a prosocial game, one that is not violent or aggressive, as the main games available in the market.

To conclude, we still need to look at a third alternative. There are games susceptible to attract girls and boys in the same way and can be placed in the same category rather than in opposite ones. They are neutral videogames with regard to gender stereotype, based on non-violent contents, and with activities geared for a non-stereotypical user regardless of gender.

But, what are the boys and girls preferences when it comes to computer games?

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

Investigation in the area of computer games and gender is relatively recent, in that there still does not exist a large number of studies. In spite of this, the studies that have been done show a similar development, focus, and conclusions. The studies have been traditionally made of two types: on the one hand, an analysis of the games themselves with respect to content, characters, themes and graphics; and on the other hand, a study of the game users with relation to variables such as attitude, competence and preferences. Methodologically, most of the investigations have been performed by means of studies such as ex-post-facto, observational, co-relational, and comparative-causal enquiries and analyses.

The analysis of computer games has always revealed the presence of a higher number of masculine characters and the representation of the stereotypical roles for both sexes—masculine dominance and action vs. feminine submission and passivity—and even the female characters as sexual objects or ornaments (Urbina, Riera, Ortego, & Gilbert, 2002). The predominant themes are women being rescued, revenge, and especially good guys against bad guys (Matthis, 1996), with designs resembling games that

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