

The Intersection of Gender, Information Technology, and Art

Linda Doyle

University of Dublin, Ireland

Maryann Valiulis

University of Dublin, Ireland

INTRODUCTION

The interdisciplinary field of art and technology is now well established in artistic and academic communities (Wilson, 2001). However, this article will focus on how the combination of technology and art can be used to facilitate the expression of thoughts, the experience of ideas and the explorations of concepts dealing with gender. A research project called the Art of Decision, which focuses on women in decision making, is used as a means of investigating the ways in which creative technologies can illuminate aspects of gender studies.

BACKGROUND

Creative Technologies

In the context of the research presented here, information technology (IT) is defined very broadly as an entire array of mechanical and electronic devices that aid in the storage, retrieval, communication and management of information. It includes all computing technologies and mobile and fixed communication technologies, but it is not restricted to those areas. Smart materials that change attributes on the basis of input stimuli and that can be used to present and display information or react to information, holographic systems, sensors, audio technologies, image technologies, video technologies and many more are all of interest. In this article, the term “creative technology” is used to describe the combination of these types of technologies with artistic practices and methods or the use of these technologies in an artistic manner or in a mode that follows

a particular artistic aesthetic. The use of technology for artistic expression is widespread, and while very many works of art can be of a political nature, the concept of using art and technology in the construction of purpose-build systems for exploring gender questions is novel.

Gender

Gender is a complex category of analysis that defies simple definition. It can be viewed as the result of socialization—the emphasis of 1970s/1980s second-wave feminist theorists (Nicholson, 1997) or more currently of performance, of the repetition of doing gender, “the repeated inculcation of a norm” (Salih, 1993, p. 139). This article endorses the view of gender as a result of the interaction between biology and the social environment—what Anne Fausto Sterling calls the “complex web” (Sterling, 2000). It endorses her repudiation of the sex-gender or nature-nurture divide that she claims fails to “appreciate the degree to which culture is a partner in producing body systems ...” (Sterling, 2005, p. 1516). This entry also reflects the view of Caroline Ramazanoglu, who takes “gender to include: sexuality and reproduction; sexual difference, embodiment, the social constitution of male, female, ... masculinity and femininity” (Ramazanoglu, 2002, p. 5). Finally, it appreciates the views of Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon, who hold a multifaceted view of gender that includes gender as a “feature of subjectivity,” as “cultural understandings and representations of what it is like to be a man or a woman” and “as a social variable structuring the pathways of those so classified within society” (Alsop et al., 2002, p. 3). What must be emphasized in all these

definitions is that gender intersects and interacts with other factors of identity, such as class, race or sexual orientation.

A definition of gender must include a theory of power. Gender is not a neutral concept, but rather, different degrees and kinds of power attach itself to genders in specific ways. Again, it is important to understand the power of gender as it intersects with all the other human differences. For example, in its simplest form, the traditional white male middle-class gender speaks of political power.

Power, however, is important in other ways. It is integral to the joining of creative technologies and gender, and in this context is defined as the power to produce, authorize and impart knowledge. Often, traditional science and technology have assumed the air of impartiality and objectivity, which gave them the veneer of having produced “authoritative knowledge.” Joining gender to art and technology is to problematize questions of objectivity, authority and knowledge production.

Using new creative media in an exploration of gender and power opens up new possibilities for studying that relationship. This is of particular importance in an age that often considers it trendy to speak of postfeminism, of the “idea that feminism has had its day” (Davis, 2004, p. 140). It is in this context that this article argues that the joining of gender and art and technology through the use of feminist methodology can invigorate a discussion about gender and allow for the presentation of material on gender in new and exciting ways.

THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER, IT, AND ART

The use of creative technologies with its flexibility, crossing of boundaries, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity lend themselves to feminist inquiry and provide a space to develop feminist research. At the most basic level, the tools available to us allow material on gender to be presented in a new and exciting way. While this, of course, applies to material of any nature, the use of these techniques in the gender sphere is particularly appropriate.

Gender studies are underpinned by feminist research methodologies. Feminist methodology is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, drawing insights

from different fields and weaving them together through an understanding of feminist theory. For example, Ramazanoglu’s definition of feminist methodology (Ramazanoglu, 2002) speaks about feminist methodology as being grounded in women’s experience and seeks to analyze connections among ideas, experience and material reality. DeVault, on the other hand, discusses the need for “excavation ... that is to find what had been ignored, censored and suppressed, and to reveal both diversity of actual women’s lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible” (DeVault, 1999, p. 30). Reihartz includes in her definition an emphasis on multiplicity of methods and perspectives, of being transdisciplinary, of the effort to create social change, of being inclusive (Reihartz, 1992). Jenkins et al. see “the concept of power as central to feminist research” as well as noting the importance of “how the researcher and the researched have been gendered, sexualized, raced and classed” (Jenkins et al., 2003 p. 2, 4).

Irrespective of the exact definition used, feminist methodologies incorporate the desire to give women an opportunity to tell their stories, express their views and have their voices heard. In essence, it is women-centered. It acknowledges that researcher and researched are “gendered, sexualized, raced and classed,” and both bring these characteristics into the research project (Jenkins, 2002). We consider the interaction of gender with other characteristics of identity as vital to understanding the complexities of research. To summarize very broadly, feminist research methodology: (1) places major emphasis on valuing a variety of viewpoints, (2) is highly concerned with remaining true to the voices of both those who research and are researched, (3) embraces complexity of argument, and (4) incorporates elements of social responsibility and a desire for social change. IT and, in particular in this case, the combination of the technology with artistic practices and methods, can play a major role in the first of these three essential criteria, as shown in Table 1.

As can be seen from that table, the negative potential of the technology is also listed. However, the existence of these very obvious negative factors also has a role to play. Often, traditional science and technology have assumed the air of impartiality and objectivity that gave them the veneer of having produced “authoritative knowledge.” In the current

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