

Chapter 12

Femininities and Technologies: Gender Identities and Relations in Video Games

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ABSTRACT

The role of gender in the design of technologies has been a topic of growing importance in fields such as interaction design, HCI, and games. Understanding that technology development and usage practices emerge within the cultural processes, the authors propose in this chapter a discussion about the notions of traditional femininity, its relation to video games, as well as new approaches to female representation. It is also assessed the cultural understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality, as well as how these notions may influence the players experience. The issues discussed and briefly analyzed here point to a production and regulation of gender by technologies such as video games. Therefore, the goal is to assess how gender notions and relations influence the design and use of games in terms of visuals, narrative and sociability.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter starts with the premise that technology development and its usage practices emerge within social and cultural processes. That means that technology's historical heritage and the developers' context influence its processes and products (Bardzell, 2010). Video games, as technological artifacts, are equally affected by the social, historical and cultural dynamics. The role of gender in designing technologies has been a topic of growing importance in fields such as Interaction design and HCI (Bardzell, 2010; Breslin & Wadhwa, 2014), and Games (Shaw, 2014; Cassel & Jenkins, 2000; Rodrigues, 2014; Goulart & Nardi, 2017). Most discussions involving female representation or femininity in video games approach visual and narrative aspects. Those are important pillars to understand representation, and in addition to these

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topics, the approach regarding the interaction between players, and how gender notions and relations shape the sociability between players is proposed here.

Therefore, in this chapter, the goal is to analyze the influence of gender norms and relations related to femininity in the development and use of video games. It starts with an explanation of essential terms to ground the theoretical discussion around gender relations in video games, and later a brief analysis about female representation and player's experiences. In the brief analysis, the authors first focus on the representation of three characters from the game "Overwatch." Later, a few players' shared experiences, concerning gender and game discussions, are also briefly analyzed, taking into account the notion of rape culture and the power relations that structure gender relations in society. This analysis took into consideration: visual aspects, narrative and sociability, in order to cover both the designer/project and the player/usage realms. The visual and narrative factors are considered relevant because they take part in the development and design of games. The sociability factor is relevant because it focuses on how players act upon gender in video games. Without further ado, in this chapter, the intention is to discuss how gender norms, identities and relations shape the design of video games, as well as the ways the notion of femininity can be reinforced or subverted by its use.

Important Concepts and Definitions

In this chapter, gender is approached by denying the ideas that men and women are essentially and naturally different. The authors understand that this vision would reinforce stereotypes, and would rely on the notion that the body is a mirror to an inner biological feminine/masculine essence. This approach would be reductive, seeking to explain subjects as automatic results of inner impulses (Weeks, 2001). We argue that gender is constructed, and therefore it doesn't represent a biological given essence of bodies. According to Weeks (2001), in the last two centuries, "sex" has acquired a meaning based on anatomic differences between the female and the male body, that is, what biologically divides people into women and men. Our approach draws on the notion introduced by Simone de Beauvoir, that "one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes a woman" (De Beauvoir, 1989), which distinguishes sex (as a biological, or anatomical feature of a body) and the notions expected and built under it (namely gender). Even though sex is understood as describing anatomic features of the body, the meanings that are associated to them belong to the social and historical realms (Weeks, 2001). Breslin and Wadhwa (2014b), based on Beauvoir's notion describe the following definitions: 1) sex, as a biological sexual identity assigned to one at birth; and 2) gender, as the behaviors, values, and other attributes associated to a given sex, which are learned throughout life. Breslin and Wadhwa (2014b) point out that this implies that being female and being a woman do not mean the same thing, and these categories are not necessarily associated.

With this approach to gender as socially constructed, we intend to deviate from universal notions of "men" and "women" and understand that people are able to belong to these categories or not. Still, as Breslin and Wadhwa (2014b) point out, it is important to acknowledge that in many cultures around the world there are societal norms and habits that associate femininity and being female. The notion of what it means to be a woman in a given society is influenced by what is socially and culturally constructed as appropriate to that gender. In the construction of your own gender identity these factors are relevant, both to be denied or identify with.

According to Weeks (2001), the Victorian age was a period that sexual conservatism towards women was growing strong. In a time when venereal diseases were a huge threat to people's lives, women's sexuality was constantly controlled and regulated instead of men's. This contradictory moral sense intended

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