

Chapter 6

Gender and Digital Gameplay: Theories, Oversights, Accidents, and Surprises

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we take a fresh look at gender and digital gameplay. Rather than repeat the stereotypes of who plays what, how, and why, we show how our own preconceptions about gender keep surprises at bay, reinforcing, instead, oft-cited ideologies. As researchers, we are entitled to be surprised by our findings. Serious interpretive work, in conjunction with alternative methodologies, promise very different findings from the expected, and accepted, assumptions about women and girls and their involvement in gameplay.

INTRODUCTION

If someone returns from work one night and announces he has accidentally run over a cat on the way home, that's one thing. If he comes home night after night having accidentally run over one cat after another, it's reasonable to question his affection for cats, and to dispute the extent to which this can be rightly called an 'accident' anymore. (D. W. Hamlyn, class notes, c. 1977)

This chapter is about an apparent inability to give centre stage to the concept of “equity” in theorizing, analyzing, or interpreting research on gender and gameplay, an inability that is, in fact, so frequent as to no longer appear accidental. This is an issue that has been brewing in our minds for some time. Several years ago, similarly baffled at the apparent inability of otherwise well-informed, sophisticated educational researchers and scholars to comprehend any but the most outdated definition of gender equity as “equal numbers of males and females in all

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subjects,” it began to dawn on us that something was going persistently and systematically wrong with work on this issue (Bryson & de Castell, 1993). To be clear, there is unquestionably theoretically insightful, radical, intellectually exciting ground being broken in gender studies. There is, for example, brilliant work in queer theory from the likes of Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Donna Haraway; work that amply testifies to the advances in conceptualization that can be and have been made. But what happens in the move from gender-based theory to application, in sociology, in design, in research, in equity policy, in game studies, or in any other arena of “progressive” gender-centric practice?

In this chapter, we call on some of that insightful and innovative theoretical work in questioning the apparent mistakes of contemporary work on gender and digital gameplay. We re-consider deficiencies as “e-fficiencies,” as deeply-rooted forms of productive “bio-power” (Foucault, 1990) that induce a perception of the constructed and artificial as natural and essential, so as to render profound inquiry inconceivable, thus disabling critical inquiry. In other words, this chapter is an attempt to rethink long-held assumptions and presumptions of work on gender and gameplay in an effort to demarcate more clearly how they have not only biased our analyses to date, but have also obscured what might well be present if we employed a different framework for viewing. In some sense, this is, as Iris Marion Young (among many others) has pointed out, a struggle over language, the very words we use to describe events, to encode practices, to shape the stories we tell as researchers (Young, 1998/2005). In this attempt to re-think persistent and repetitive “accidents” of theory, we will touch briefly on a longitudinal study (three years) of gender and digital gameplay with more than 100 girls and boys aged 12-15 (for a fuller description of the study, see Jenson, de Castell, & Fisher, 2007) to illustrate more fully the workings of some of these all too familiar discursive traps.

A useful beginning in nearly all contemporary work on gender is with Butler’s analysis of gender performativity, which invites us to distinguish between what appears to be an essential truth of gender from the conventions that, through their repeated embodiment, appear both necessary and natural. Echoing earlier arguments by feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith that explanations invoking women’s roles are in actuality ideological moves which reify conventions, imposing expectations and obligations which ought to be critically exposed, Butler writes that “gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior ‘self,’ whether that ‘self’ is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an ‘act,’ broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (Butler, 1990, p.22).

In this view, what the repetition of conventional gender performances accomplishes is hegemony. Repetition is far from a mistake, or an unhappy accident of scholarship gone wrong. Instead, what we are looking at are the deepest epistemic roots of scholarly inquiry in an extremely important cultural area. This would be a different vision altogether, a vision of something working very well indeed, working so well, in fact, that even experienced and accomplished researchers find themselves, ourselves, steering, mesmerized, to aporia. What repetition signals, then, is not an accident, but something quite purposeful: a deeply-structured process which naturalizes convention and makes it impossible to see or hear anything other than an inner truth of gender that does not seem capable of dislodging when discussions move from the esoteric domains of high theory into applied areas like social, technological, and educational research, design, policy, and practice.

In the next section we begin by enumerating some of the conventions and norms that are often repeated when writing and talking about women/girls and playing digital games and then show

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