Videogames en gender : over spelende meiden, sexy avatars en huiselijkheid op het scherm
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Abstract

In this PhD dissertation the relationship between gender and video games is explored in three separate studies. The objective of this research is to make women who play video games visible and discuss different theoretical interpretations of the practices of playing video games by female gamers. The theoretical framework in the literature chapter discusses the different ways games have been approached from a gender perspective.

Playing videogames has been considered as a means to develop digital capital, which could help in overcoming the digital divide between men and women. Within this view, games are understood as double primers in the field of communication technology. On the one hand the medium can function as an instrumental primer, which means that playing a computer game facilitates the development of practical computer skills. On the other hand, video games can be seen as cultural primers, in the sense that mastery of them influences the social interpretation of computer technology. In the first case study the function of games as instrumental primer is attended to, while the second and third study deal mainly with the function of games as cultural primers, and are centered around the cultural interpretation of video games and computers in their relation to gender and identity. The project is therefore positioned within the domain of identity development, which is considered as a key concept within the field of cultural studies, and thus elaborates on the concept of the active audience, which indicates the capability of audiences to use media in (re)constructing and performing identity.

The theoretical context is complemented with insights from leisure studies, gender studies and the young field of game studies. Because playing a video game touches topics that have traditionally been shaped in gender-specific ways, such as technology, leisure and media use, the study of digital entertainment can offer new insights into gender issues within these separate domains.

1. Practices: what games do girls play?

What do girls’ game practices look like, and to what extent can assumptions about the connection between gender, computer skills and playing video games be confirmed by these practices? To answer these questions, 104 female high school students have been asked to fill in a largely open ended questionnaire, which gives an overall picture of the games they play and the role and significance of these games in their lives. The survey impression is completed by additional studies on ‘game biographies’, conducted among
college students, and by an exploration of the gendered patterns that emerged around the game programming contest called Make a Game.

The findings show that girls who often play video games own their own game consoles, take part in video game culture, and for them the activity of gaming is embedded in their relationships with female friends. However, the mean age of this group is relatively low. This confirms previous findings on the ‘video game gender rift’. This term refers to the phenomenon that girls around the age of fourteen quite abruptly lose their interest in playing video games. ‘I’m interested in other things, such as my friends, my boyfriend, and school’, is the explanation girls themselves give for this. The study does not, however, confirm the often assumed connection between gender, computer skills and playing video games. Most girls that filled in the questionnaire owned their own computer, and most of them used their computers for school work, or to stay in touch with their friends. Using computers did not seem to be connected to playing video games: the girls that played videogames did not use their computers more often, or for different purposes, than girls who did not play games.

2. Final Fantasy forums: videogames as technologies of gender

The second case study asks: do video games provide means for reflection upon and performance of gender identity? Can video games function as technologies of gender? This study is based on a qualitative analysis of messages that gamers posted on websites devoted to the role playing game Final Fantasy X-2. Threads and posts were methodically selected, resulting in a collection of statements in which forum members made comments either about the male or female characters in the game, about other forum members, or about themselves. The quotes were then categorized and analyzed, resulting in three levels: as comments on gender related issues, discussing these, or reflecting upon them.

The analysis showed that the game that these boys and girls played indeed incited them comment, discuss and reflect on looks, behavior and personality of the characters in the game, but also on their own gender identity and that of others. The game inspired them to discuss and comment upon appropriate male and female behavior. The question whether a video game can act as a technology of gender can thus be answered positively.

The analysis in this study further shows that although female gamers may have their objections to female game characters that look slutty, the presence of these characters does not automatically lead to rejection of the whole game. These objections towards vulgar looking female avatars are also expressed by boys. These results show that gamers take a much more active role in negotiating gender identity than was previously assumed,
and lead to alternative insights concerning the assumption that game characters would offer one dimensional stimuli, causing clear negative or positive effects.

3. Female gamers en _The Sims_

The third case study reports on research into the game experiences of adult women who play the video game _The Sims_. The research question for this study is: how is playing a video game embedded in the social structures within the gamers’ household, and how do gamers appropriate the game and the activity of gaming within their domestic structure?

For this study 23 in depth interviews with Dutch female gamers from the ages of 17 and older have been conducted, and this information has been complemented by data that 34 other women send in by email. Social and cultural context, preferences and motives, and digital skills were themes that were raised in these interviews. The transcripts of the discussions were interpreted using a systematic scheme of qualitative analysis.

This study has given insights in the practices of a large but thus far largely invisible group of gamers: adult women. It is shown that these gamers play their games with passion and dedication, and that they are – in contrast to what is often assumed about them – surely willing to invest time and money in their gaming hobby. Considering the appropriation of the game, the analysis shows that the act of playing a videogame within the household is surrounded by several characteristic processes. The motivation for playing a game, and the gratifications a player derives from gaming, show parallels with motivations for and gratifications from using other media, such as watching soap opera on television or reading a romance novel. Playing a game can be seen as a form of leisure that is purely meant for entertainment, but also related to technology, and thus unmistakably contains emancipatory potential.

Finally, it can be stated that active interpretation and appropriation by female gamers is an important factor that has to be taken into consideration when looking at the interaction between video games and gender. Interpretation and appropriation are dependent on age and the various circumstances within the gamers’ life. Teenage girls in high school, for whom the connection of games with technology and male gender identity may cause some friction or discomfort, may perceive the medium in a different way than adult women for whom this connection may be fairly unimportant. For them, gaming can be a means to temporarily escape the hustle and bustle of family life by concentrating on a fictive household on a computer screen. Women, as has been concluded often before, do not form one homogenous audience – and surely this notion applies to female players of video games just as well.