GENDER AND IDENTITY IN VIDEO GAMES AS A VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: The design of video games encourages playfulness and exploration in an environment that revolves around problem solving. The development of these traits and the learning potential in virtual environments have caught the attention of educators (Gee & Hayes, 2010) [1]. Video games are a very common motivator in learning how to use new technology; skills the students will have great use of in the future. Although since gaming is considered unfeminine, many girls tend to give up gaming as teenagers and they thereby miss the opportunity to learn how to use new technologies as well as developing their skills in problem solving (Gee, 2007) [2]. Video games and other virtual learning environments can also be considered as alternative realities where the gamer can become whoever he or she wants. Juul (2009) [3] argues that the gamer’s identity is highly characterized by his or her attitude towards gaming and whether he or she is inclined to identify as a gamer. Gee (2007) notes the relevance of the identity perspective in regard to learning through video games. According to him, the gamer identity consists of three different identities that together form an entirety: the virtual identity, the real life identity and the projective identity where Gee plays with the word project and its two meanings. On the one hand there is a gamer projecting his or her values and desires onto the virtual character. On the other hand, the character can be considered a project where the gamer within the limits of the game creates a personality for their character [2]. In other words, the girls who give up gaming also miss out on the possibility to explore their own identities as well. During eLSE I wish to give a presentation based on my master’s thesis on how video games, even commercial ones, can be considered learning environments and how this point of view will evolve in my doctoral thesis.

Keywords: video games; identity; learning; virtual environments

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on my master’s thesis on gender and learning in video games [4]. The thesis is theoretical and illuminates an international phenomenon from several different perspectives. In this paper I focus on theory on video games and learning, and theory on women and video games, yet in the thesis there are other perspectives as well. Theories on play and multimodality as well as a national perspective with regulatory documents such as the Finnish core curriculum for basic education. In this paper I discuss the key findings and how these findings work as a foundation for my planned doctoral thesis.

II. VIDEO GAMES AND LEARNING

David Williamson Shaffer discusses the definition of a game in How Computer Games Help Children Learn [5] and he argues that the pleasure of playing a game is not what defines a game. On a superficial level a game can be about the fun of playing or about winning, but neither of these traits profoundly define what a game is. Williamson Shaffer states that it is the rules and roles that follow the rules that define a game. He refers to Lev Vygotsky who supposedly said “there is no such thing as play without rules” (2006, s. 23). According to Williamson Shaffer even what adults interpret as free play, is as a matter of fact, controlled by norms that dictate what the participants can and can’t do. Through
playing children can reach different worlds that they afraid to approach or that they can not experience in real life. Video games as well offer new worlds which the children do not necessarily have access to in real life. [5]

James Paul Gee and Elisabeth R. Hayes claims in *Women and Gaming – The Sims and 21st century learning* [1] that today's society demands skills like information retrieval and the ability to use that knowledge when solving problems. Video games offer a way to practice these skills in a playful way. According to Gee the motivation of the player, and to what degree the player is willing to challenge himself or herself, affects how that person will learn when playing video games. No matter who the player is, or what qualifications he or she has, there are two variables that deeply affects learning in video games. The first is the structure of the game and most games today are designed in a way that stimulates learning. The second variable is the network around the player: players as well as non-players can support the player to contemplate and discuss the structure of the game as well as games in general.[2]

There are five levels of learning when playing video games according to Marc Prensky: how, what, why, where and whether. When playing a video games, the player learns how to move the character and what real life movements leads to which consequences in the virtual world. This type of learning is easy to notice since the player gets more competent in moving the character in a natural way. Further, the player learns the rules of the game through trial and error and in that way what to do. The player compares the game, more or less consciously, not only to other games but to reality as well. In regard to past experience and the rules of the game the player contemplates why he or she should choose one alternative over the other. Different strategies offer different rewards and the player gains insight into the relation between cause and effect but also the significance of secondary consequences. The player contemplates, again more or less consciously, where they game takes place and what culture it represents. Finally the last level of learning in video games in whether a choice is ethically right or wrong and if the same behaviour could be fruitful in real life. [6]

Decision making and problem solving are a key part of the gaming experience. Prensky (2006 s.61) points out that “Today’s complex computer and videogames are long, deep, and hard to master. And at their core, they’re all about making decisions, which is something kids love to do – especially decisions that affect them”. Decisions feel meaningful when there are consequences for the character as well as the world in which the game take place. There are different forms of decisions, from what to do when, to how to prepare and what strategy to use. The response on whether the consequences of the decision gains the player or not are usually clear and immediate.

Problem solving is another key element of playing video games. "Video games are built around problem solving in an environment that encourages playfulness and exploration” [1]. Gee points out that games encourage the players to identify themselves as active problems solver who don't consider mistakes as something negative but a possibility for reflection and learning. Gee further argues that this attitude towards problem solving should be encouraged in school as well. [2]

When a person is to learn something, he or she needs to make an effort to make this possible. Effort and success are according to Gee (2007, s. 58) connected: “Success without effort is not rewarding; and effort with little success is equally unrewarding”. In order to play a demanding video game there is a lot effort involved, but the reward for success is often large as well. Good video games are designed in a way that reward different types of players in different ways.

So what is new in learning in through video games? Games designed for learning are already a known tool in education. A child can engage in a learning game but they tend to lose interest when they get to try a “real” game. Prensky points out the difference between mini-games and complex video games. When video games are a topic for discussion it happens that people think about mini-games rather than complex video games or do not see the difference between the two. Mini-games are also called ping games or flash games and tend to have a repetitive design. Complex video games are less repetitive and offer different types of challenges. Some complex video games offer the possibility to play the game together with other players, an option that almost never is offered in mini-games. [6]

Complex video games further offer the players to identify themselves with a character different to their real life identity. This possibility is seldom offered in mini games and neither is meaningful decisions of different types. Another important factor of the game design of complex video games is the possibility to keep track on one's progress. This is usually measured by different levels and leveling up. To witness the progress one have made since the beginning of the game can be rewarding if the game is
on the right level of difficulty. If a game is too easy or hard the player will stop playing after a short while. If the player feels challenged on an appropriate level, and there is a goal to strive to, the game will keep the player interested. Some games offer a specific goal to strive to but others offer the player the tools to create a goal of their own and the means to reach this goal. [6]

III. WOMEN AND VIDEO GAMES

According to Gustavsson leisure time activities and to what the extent one has the possibility to exercise one's hobbies is deeply connected to the gender identity. In a school where different gender expressions are accepted, all students can be open about their hobbies, including the ones that might be considered deviant. [7] Heeter and Winn perceive the commercial games of today as a male media where the genres, the content and the game mechanics are created by and for young men [8]. Girls who play video games deviate from the gender norm and can be considered socially deviant [9].

During the 1990's there was an effort to create game developed and marketed for girls only yet one of the few that sold at all was Barbie Fashion Designer. These types of games are today called pink and purple games. Barbie Fashion Designer was a pink game since it focused on traditional feminine values such as looks. The efforts were terminated since "Everyone knew girls simply didn't like computer games and wouldn't play them" (Laurel, 2008, s.22). Purple Moon was a game company created by woman creating games for women and they launched their first game in 1997. Instead of focusing on looks or fashion they created games with focus on the social lives of girls. The term purple games is based on the name of the company. [10]

The bestselling video game so far is The Sims, with all its expansions the Sims sold a hundred million copies in 2008. In The Sims the player controls a family, creates a house for the family and guide their lives in the society. The game has been compared to a dollhouse or a sandbox and most players of The Sims are female but there are also male players. One reason behind the success of The Sims is believed to be the tools to create and design inside the game since many players spend more time designing content for the game than actually playing the game. [1]

Both Barbie Fashion Designer and The Sims are often mentioned as milestones in female gaming. According to Ito, this is a Western point of view, since there are Japanese games that have appealed to both genders as well. Pac-Man and Donkey Kong are two examples but the most important one is Pokémon. Ito (2008, s. 103) states that "Part of Pokémon’s success was based on its ability to appeal to girls as well as boys. Given that Game Boy gaming was so central to Pokémon, it also had the side effect of drawing girls to gaming in large numbers." Pokémon appealed to different types of players because there was both aggressive fighting between Pokémon but also the need to nurture your Pokémon between the fights [11]

These so called games for girls where criticized for presuming that all girls are the same and have the same preferences when it comes to gaming. The Sims and Pokémon are examples on games that have appealed to girls but has not exclusively been marketed as a girl game. Since neither The Sims nor Pokémon is limited to one style of play, the players have freedom, to some extent at least, to create the game they wish to play.

Most female players tend to break the gender norms more easily when their presence in the game is legitimized by a male relation, a brother, a father or a perhaps a boyfriend. It is common that female players are introduced to a game by a romantic partner, about 27% of the online players in Yees study started to play this way, yet only 1% of the male players have started to play through a romantic partner. Playing together with a romantic partner can also be the reason why a female player continues to play the game, since playing together might be beneficial for the relationship, Yee (2008, s.87) points out that "Men are allowed relatively free access to online games, but a woman’s presence in an online game is seen as legitimate only if it occurs via a relationship with a man”. If a girl or woman lacks the possible male relation that could legitimate her presence, she might not be aware that games could interest her at all. [12]

Sundén and Sveningsson discus experiences among women in the online game World of Warcraft. The norm is that a player is male and even in queer groups inside the game the player is presumed to be male, yet a homosexual male. Being woman in a male game culture has pros as well as cons. Female players tend to receive more gifts, help and advice from other players than male players do since "... as one of the female informants stated, even if one does not deliberately play on gender,
appear help-seeking, ingratiating, or flirtatious, female players may get advantages anyway, just because of being women” (2012, s. 40). [13]

Today, men and women under 30 are less affected by traditional views on gender than men and women over 30. Female players are the most rapidly growing group of players [14] and women under 30 use more advanced technology and play more video games than women over 30. Yet, according to the Game Developers Association, only 11.5% of the game development industry in USA is female. And further, the women in the game development industry tend to work with marketing or human resources and not in the actual process of developing the game.

According to Hughes there are findings that girls tend to believe that only men can be skilled with computers. This might be one reason why there are so few women in the game development industry and other STEM-professions. STEM stands for ”science, technology, engineering and math” (Hughes, 2008, s. 231). Due to stereotypes, girls tend to think that STEM-professions suits males better females and that people in this profession have traits that girls not wish to identify with. [15]

In comparison, when girls use technology they tend to focus on communication while boys usually use technology for different types of entertainment. Boys further tend to develop more material themselves which gives them greater understanding of technology and higher confidence in using technologies. This might be one reason why boys perform better in technology education than their female classmates. If the girls are teenagers when they first have any technology education they might already consider themselves as poor users of technology and not learn as much as they would have. Games might be one possible way for girls to get interested in technologies but there are obstacles here as well. It is more socially accepted that boys play a lot of games and especially games with violence are considered unfeminine. Even though there are successful female players in violent game genres, identifying as a female gamer is still socially unrewarding. [9] The opposite might be a problem for boys, since playing games is such a common interest, boys who do not play might feel left out. [8]

One way to get girls into playing games is to create games that appeal to girls but not necessarily to girls only. There are larger differences in preferences games between girls as a group than there are between girls and boys: ”Designing games based on extreme stereotypical preferences leaves out what most of boys, and girls, find fun. In comparing what boys and girls find most fun in games, the distribution curves overlap more than they exclude” (Lazzaro, 2008, s. 203). [16]

IV. GENDER AND LEARNING IN VIDEO GAMES – KEY FINDINGS

Based on theory, my key findings are seven key factors that all affect and are affected by girls and young women playing video games. The factors are not number or arranged by impact. I further wish to point out that these factors also could affect male players as well even if the focus is on female players at this point. [4]

Figure 1 Girls and young women playing video games [4]
The first key factor is skills. Skills that all players can develop through playing video games. One essential example on this type of skill is problem solving. The second factor is values, and they way that moral decisions in video games might open the player's eyes for the values he or she stand for. Identity is the the third factor and a big part of the gaming experience, both inside and outside of the game. [4]

The fourth factor is gender expression: how female characters are depicted as well as how female players are regarded and treated. The social environment around the player is the following factor, where the social environment inside the game as well as outside of the game affects the experience of the game. [4]

Male relations as access points is the sixth key factor to female players since they offer a way into the game. The final key factor is the female players' future prospects and the way knowledge in technology can be gained through playing video games. [4]

V. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the seven key factors in the research on girls and young women playing video games is identity. Yet all the six remaining factors could be part of the female identity as a player. The complexity of the term identity opened my eyes for possible future research in this area. As Buckingham (2010, s.1) states “Identity is an ambiguous and slippery term”. Therefore, my main focus so far in the process with my doctoral thesis have been focused on this term. [17]

Juul for an example, argues that the gamer’s identity is highly characterized by his or her attitude towards gaming and whether he or she is inclined to identify as a gamer. [3] Gee on the other hand, notes the relevance of the identity perspective in regard to learning through video games. The gamer identity consists, according to Gee, of three different identities that together form an entirety. The virtual identity, the real life identity and the projective identity where Gee plays with the word project and its two meanings. On the one hand there is a gamer projecting his or her values and desires onto the virtual character. On the other hand, the character can be considered a project where the gamer within the limits of the game creates a personality for their character. [2]

My research interest is how children and youngsters create their identity in virtual learning environments. I intend to write a doctoral thesis by publication and the aim of the research is illuminating different ways of creating an identity in different virtual learning environments, where video games are one example of a virtual learning environment. [16]

Reference Text and Citations


