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Vorwort

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Eine soziologische Betrachtung von Technik zeichnet sich unter anderem dadurch aus, dass das Bedingungsverhältnis zwischen den technischen Artefakten und den sozialen Kontexten, in die jene eingebettet sind, als ein interdependentes - zu beiden Seiten hin gleichermaßen konstitutives - angesehen wird. Diesem Wesenszug soziologischer Perspektiven auf Technik trägt der Titel dieser Reihe Rechnung, insofern von einer kulturellen Einfärbung von Technik sowie - vice versa - eines Abfärbens von technikinhärenten Merkmalen auf das Soziale auszugehen ist. Darüber hinaus schieben sich zwischen den vielfältigen Kontexten der Forschung, Entwicklung, Herstellung, Gewährleistung und Nutzung zusätzliche Unschärfen ein, die den unterschiedlichen Schwerpunktsetzungen und Orientierungen dieser Kontexte geschuldet sind: In einer hochgradig ausdifferenzierten Gesellschaft ist das Verhältnis von Sozialem und Technik von je spezifischen Ent- und Rückbettungsdynamiken gekennzeichnet. Die vorliegende Working Paper Reihe möchte mit jeder Ausgabe einen kleinen Beitrag zur Klärung dieses verschlungenen Verhältnisses leisten.

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Gender in Digital Games: Gameplay as Cyborg Performance

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Digital Games, Feminist Studies, Cyborg, Gender Representations, Alternative Subjectivities

Abstract

Computer games have now been around nearly forty years. The pace at which computer games have transformed has been so fast that at times it is exceeding thoughtful evaluation and criticism. Since the beginning of the 2000's, academic understanding of this phenomenon has been trying to catch up with this pace. Feminist studies has also been observing computer gaming, theorizing it as another male-dominated cultural domain. Most of the feminist inquiries in this area have focused on representations of gender and violence in games. Focus on gender and identity relationships between the game players and game characters, has been relatively small. What mostly missing from the current research, is the gender transgressions and alternative subjectivities that might hold political meanings besides the personal ones. Virtual reality communities and massively multiplayer role-playing online games challenge the ideas of identity and gender. As the computer gaming world grows larger, gender representations are becoming more fluid and ambiguous; the possibilities of subversive readings of gender and alternative subjectivities expand.

Introduction

Computer games have now been around nearly forty years. The crude and simple graphics of the first generation of computer games were first developed in the seventies. Since then computer games have turned into a highly advanced seventy-eight billion dollar industry worldwide. (Reuters, 2012) Technology, design processes, and content evolved enormously quickly and rather chaotically over this period. The pace at which computer games have transformed has been so fast that at times it is exceeding thoughtful evaluation and criticism. Since the beginning of the 2000's, academic understanding of this phenomenon has been trying to catch up with this pace. However, it is necessary to add that the research that has been conducted in the last years about games and gaming has generated a common terminology, competing paradigms and serious debates.

Feminist studies has also been observing computer gaming, theorizing it as another male-dominated cultural domain where violence against women, stereotyping, objectifying, sexualizing of women are problematic. Most of the feminist inquiries in this area have

focused on representations of gender and violence in games.

Focus on gender and identity relationships between the game players and game characters, has been relatively small. What mostly missing from the current research, is the gender transgressions and alternative subjectivities that might hold political meanings besides the personal ones. Virtual reality communities and massively multiplayer role-playing online games challenge the ideas of identity and gender. As the computer gaming world grows larger, gender representations are becoming more fluid and ambiguous; the possibilities of subversive readings of gender and alternative subjectivities expand.

Playing computer games is a cybernetic process where the player and the game become inseparable, once the player starts playing she and the computer form a cybernetic feedback loop, interpreting the world as they go. Within this cybernetic process of game-play, where embodiment is defined by a different set of rules than in real life, alternative subjectivities and different kinds of experiences are made possible.

This process, which blurs the boundaries between the game and the player, the self and the technological, the technics[1] and human, evokes Donna Haraway's (1985) ontology of cyborg – a hybrid subjectivity that is dependent on this fusion of the machine and the human. Cyborg figure is an important configuration of how technologies are embodied, and although it is controversial, it has been the most useful representative of the union of bodies and technology. It has been used in a lot of work about computers, computer-human interactions and computer games. Many theorizations of technology-human relations have made use of Haraway's cyborg politics. (see, for example, Stone 1991; Flanagan and Booth, 2002; Lahti 2003; Giddings and Kennedy 2006; Dovey and Kennedy, 2007) It was developed by Donna Haraway in her "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: science, technology and socialist feminism in the 1980's" as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1990: 191), suggesting that our connection with machines can create a fluid zone of identity. The term itself derived from "cybernetic organism" which emerged from the field of cybernetics.

[1] In Don Ihde's terms, technical is physical characteristics of the technology. Such characteristics may be designed or they may be discovered and 'technics' is the symbiosis of artifact and user within a human action.

Cyborg figure transgresses the construction between the human and the machine and the division between human and animal and acknowledges the intimate ‘kinship’ with machines. Instead of constructing itself as the dominant partner in its interaction with nature and machines as the human subject, the cyborg subject accepts the interdependence with biological and technological systems. The cyborg figure, Haraway believes, can weaken the hierarchies of race, class and gender through new representations of being. If we accepted our interconnections with machines, the idealized white male subject would be “decentered” from his ontological supremacy.

Our digital bodies in virtual space, our avatars, and our experiences through those bodies can contribute to our perception of the self. During gameplay, our cyborg selves are not constrained by the limitations of real life or the dominant representations of femininity and masculinity. Furthermore, during our digital experiences as well as our perception and cognition, our material bodies also change. What would be then implications of these intersections between these spaces, the feedback between the digital bodies and our material bodies? How do these bodies serve as an understanding of a new kind of body or new genders or new species? Moreover, would these bodies allow us to experience being in another body, being discriminated against, “to be feminized”, “to be made extremely vulnerable”, being harassed, being privileged, being disabled, being enabled or different one way or another? Would these bodies allow our understanding of our own material bodies and our gender? Can virtual worlds serve for the development of genders outside the concepts of male and female? Can being under the skin of a new gender change our heteronormative perceptions?

Virtual worlds and multiplayer online games might provide a place to develop new hybrids linguistically, socially and in an embodied way and this in return might provide an understanding of the gender complexity which Judith Butler (2004) explains in “Undoing Gender”; “it is not a question merely of producing a new future for genders that do not yet exist... it is a question of developing within law, psychiatry, social and literary theory a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have been living for a long time.”

How Did the Academic Research Progress?

The popularity of computer game playing, the variety of platforms and gaming genres, changing social contexts of play, the expanded functionality of gaming consoles, and the integration of gaming technologies into devices such as smart phones, digital television and tablet computers are all aspects of computer games being a crucial component of the popular cultural landscape.

Mostly within popular discourse, but also within the academia, computer game playing has been strongly associated with media effects discourse. At first researchers had the tendency to place games and game playing within discourses associated with psychological and behavioral effects. Research results in this area are often conflicting and puzzling both to researchers and the public at large. Doing research on a terrain, which is so diverse with different game genres that differ in multiple variables, huge variety of software and hardware, and consumer communities, may create confusion, and completing the research on specific games may not be representative because of the big variety of game genres, representations, texts and formats.

Conflicting research findings are also a result of the fact that different research studies highlight different aspects of a changing process, which is multifaceted, both from the technical and social perspective. Another problem that cannot be ignored is that a lot of research fell into the same trap and started from the unfounded assumption that technology is separate from the social reality and can generate social changes by itself. Mantovani (2001) states this “impact metaphor” assumes “a causality, both unidirectional, i.e. technology would influence society without the converse taking place, and deterministic, i.e. a given technology would produce specific social effects” (emphasis original).

This tendency has changed over the last ten years, and critical work on computer games has moved beyond traditional “effects” perspectives and essentialist textual approach on symbolic content of games. But what still needed more attention were the body of the player and the nature of the technology-mediated play, which would allow us to see computer gaming in a wider network of interactions and understand the actual experience of playing computer games.

Some scholars have moved beyond traditionalist and essentialist media effects perspectives and textual approaches on computer games. It is important to give an account of their work for understanding gender and identity relationships particularly because they attempt to account for the embodied player, technology mediated play and gameplay as an embodied activity.

One of the first scholars to pay attention to digital media and computer game playing was the literary scholars, as they opened interesting directions for interactive fiction. The most important work in the literary field was Espen Aarseth's Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature (Aarseth, 1997). Aarseth analysed the games as texts and he linked adventure games; MUDs and interactive fiction to a literary tradition of labyrinthine texts. Aarseth's analysis is important not only because of its systematic analysis of game history, but also because it claims that computer games have a potential as an academic discipline in itself.

Espen Aarseth (1997) was the first researcher to suggest a theory about play and narration as two distinct modes of discourse. With the concept of the "ergodic", he provided an important tool for studying games as a distinct category of cultural activity not reducible to other categories.

Following the perspective raised by Aarseth (1997), Gonzalo Frasca (2000a) coined the term "ludology" in his article "Ludology Meets Narratology" and defined it briefly as the discipline that studies games. Ludology studies games and playing in general, leaving computer games as just a particular branch of study. Frasca (2000b) defines it as including computer game theory but going "beyond it to include all games and forms of play" and stresses that ludology does not try to understand games through existing media (theatre, film etc.). Rather, ludology attempts to examine the game-specific dynamics of games, such as the relationship between rules, strategy and game outcomes.

Ludic dimension of computer games deserves theoretical attention – and it got the attention it deserved. Computer games are always about game and play. On the other hand, computer games are computers. Play is transformed by computer technology, producing new forms of challenge, fascination and attraction. Klevjer (2001) claims that

procedural logic and the spectacular responsiveness of the computer as a media technology has created unique attractions that can not be understood through concepts and theories developed to investigate non-computerized play.

Wilson's (2000) approach was analyzing the moment of playing as a hybrid one, "where human and machine, play and code, text and reading, producer and consumer cannot be meaningfully distinguished". This kind of "Latourean" approach, which refuses to bracket gaming as a form of soft culture, considers "its technological artefacts, its involvement with transnational industry, the physical dexterities and epistemologies it demands, the differing shapes of its collectives as it proliferates, its interactions with urban spaces, and its production of different kinds and mixtures of spectators, players, narratives and machines" (Wilson, 2001) and allow us to talk about its complexity all at once.

Aarseth, in his essay "I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player" mentions another tension within game studies, the split between the social sciences' real players and the aesthetics/humanities critical author-as-player. Social science approaches are interested in the gamers or the activity of gaming; therefore they focus on other 'actual' players. The player is 'real', situated, and the emphasis is on the social and cultural dimensions of play. Humanist perspectives concentrate on player positioning, where the player is the ideal player, and the emphasis is on the games and their content. Aarseth (2007) suggests a theory that incorporates the tensions between the real player and the game's human components and combines both social and aesthetic perspectives.

Another growing body of research focuses on game/player cultures and gaming as an everyday practice. (see Taylor, 2003; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Mäyrä, 2008) In her study "Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds", Celia Pearce (2009) explores everyday practices of popular "fan" culture in networked digital worlds, where actions of players do not match with what game designers had in mind. Pearce claims that the "play turn" in culture and the emergence of a participatory global playground of digital games is as communal as the global village of Marshall McLuhan. Mia Consalvo, in her book "Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games" (2007), has a cultural games studies approach where she provides many different forms and practices of cheating in games and examples of human ingenuity in the case studies.

Consalvo looks for answers for questions such as; “Is cheating a particular kind of activity that some players sometimes decide to perform, or is cheating producing cheater identity?” (pp. 127-128.) How are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ being produced in game culture – and in culture and society more generally? The academic interest in themes like cheating and grief play is still strong.

Crogan and Kennedy (2009) argue that research relating to games and culture should develop a perspective on theorizing technology since the profound reliance of both terms on technology is undeniable. Player cultures cannot be taken as stable categories, but as processes of becoming intertwined with lineages of technological development. They focus on ludic technicity that considers game hardware, software, gameplay and other practices appropriating game technologies and call for an understanding of virtual worlds as socio-technological artifacts.

And finally, game scholars have begun to see digital games as an embodied medium involving bodies of players and to theorize the embodied nature of play (see 2003; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Sundén and Sveningsson, 2011).

Gender and Games Research

Early analyses of the relationship between gender and computer gaming have focused on the female representation within computer games. They have highlighted the lack of female game characters, and the sexualized and stereotypical representations of those included female characters (Dietz, 1998, Ritchie, 2000).

For a long time, females rarely appeared in computer games or on game boxes because the overwhelming majority of characters and protagonists were male. And when females did appear, it was typically in sexist or clearly misogynistic ways such as damsels in distress needing rescue, rewards for successful completion of a game level, victims of violence, and/or sexual objects. Computer game companies have long started to include more female characters in games, but a good percentage of these female characters continue to be over-sexualized and are usually depicted with huge breasts and a small waist. There is an overwhelming tendency to neglect to portray female characters at all or

to portray them in stereotypical female roles and in stereotypical female colors and clothing.[2] Taylor (in Kafai et al. 2008) also denotes that the gaming industry plays an important role in placing gaming as male space. Women players are seen as anomaly by the industry and the researchers and not given enough attention.

Another issue that is highlighted is the gendered differences in terms of gaming preferences and the dominance of 'masculine' themed games. This understanding leads to the perception that computer games, which mostly embody masculine interests or activities, make computer games unappealing and even offensive to females. (Wright, 2001)

Perceptions of gender differences in the popularity of computer gaming led to debates about whether game producers should attempt to produce games with a 'feminine' theme in order to encourage female gaming. This linear thinking led computer game designers and advertisers to take toys or products originally designed for boys and paint them pink in order to market them to girls as well. One of the first examples of this strategy was Pac-Man. In order to appeal to a female market, designers created Ms. Pac-Man who resembled the traditional Pac-Man in every way except she wore a pink bow on top of her head. The success of Nintendo's Gamegirl and Mattel's Barbie Fashion Designer –an application about the Barbie doll, which girls dress up for different occasions and the child's duty to design the clothes- brought a series of attempts to profit on the "girl market" which are commonly referred as 'pink games'. Later on 'purple games' emerged supposedly as a counterpart to the pink games, but still dealt with real-life issues that are assumed to be at interest to women and girls such as relationships. (Kafai et al. 2008) The majority of the attempts to take advantage of the female gamer market works within a discourse that reproduces gendered stereotypes of what might be appropriate for female gamers. (Bryce and Rutter, 2002)

However, some "masculine" themed games have attracted a significant amount of female gamers, as a lot of women have similar game preferences, interests and skills as male gamers. According to Yee (2008 in Kafai et al.), in online games the majority of men and

[2] A common representation of women in games used to be the woman as the victim or as the "Damsel in Distress". Although this tendency has changed considerably, the approach to treat women as "Damsel in Distress" still exists in online gaming platforms towards women gamers.

women have very similar preferences. Cassell and Jenkins disagree with the production of games which specifically target females, stressing the decreasing differentiation between male and female leisure activities. (Cassell and Jenkins cited in Ritchie 2000) Producing games based on stereotypical gendered preferences presumes that there are meaningful differences in terms of gender. Carr (2005) notes that patterns of gaming are very complex and gender as a sole denominator would be very misleading. Pelletier (in Kafai et al. 2008), in her study which was conducted with high school students, found that gaming preferences are influenced by social context, and that students are aware of the gender norms and would try to associate themselves with tastes that would reflect these norms.

Linking gender representation in games to consumption proves to be also problematic. Players may develop oppositional or even self-contradictory attitudes to content while still enjoying them. There is a danger in assuming that there is a causal relationship between female representation in a text and the nature of consumption of that content by female gamers. Kennedy (2002) suggests females may construct different meanings for the themes of computer games, may play games in a masculine manner, or may construct their own oppositional reading of game texts. Studies that examine Tomb Raider in detail highlight that female gamers construct different perspectives on Lara Croft. (Kennedy, 2002; Polsky, 2001; Schleiner, 2001)

Lara Croft, the first popular female game action heroine from the game "Tomb Raider" launched by Eidos Interactive in 1996, has drawn the attention of many authors because of her popularity, and has caused many debates on her diverse effects on females and males. Reading Lara Croft as a disturbing trend where boys and men develop an unrealistic ideal of the female body might be necessary for feminist studies, but this does not take into account player positions other than the heterosexual female's.

Her occupation of a traditionally masculine world, her rejection of particular patriarchal values and the norms of femininity as well as the physical spaces she journeys over are all in direct contradiction to the typical femininity locations. Schleiner (2001) suggests that there are several positions, how players engage with the character Lara Croft, for instance:

- As a “female Frankenstein: a malleable, well-trained techno-puppet created by and for the male gaze”;
- As a positive role model with her profile that is of a highly educated and adventurous upper class British woman, as skilled with combat techniques as well as puzzle solving;
- As drag queen when male players of the game are drawn into identification with her;
- As a femme fatale with leather boots "made for walking", her tight holster belt and her armory, pistols and assault rifles at her fingertips;
- As a vehicle for the queer female gaze – fantasies of violence are not exclusive to a heterosexist masculine domain.

It’s also worth mentioning the Nude Raider patches that exploit Lara’s ambiguous sexuality. These patches replace Lara’s clothes with nude skin textures. One play on Nude Raider is a classic subversive art is that represent Lara with a mustache and a goatee, a transgender Lara, a butch[3] Lara, a cross dresser Lara.

There are numerous examples of gender transgressions in or originating from gaming spaces. The kind of gender subversions that are available to the player through gaming opens up possibilities of gender experimentation and subversion and alternative subjectivities.

Gaming occurs in a virtual, social and technologically mediated space, so it is important to emphasize that gaming preferences need to be understood in terms of these contexts. Social context, technical competency, access to technologies, gaming spaces, and social networks are crucial components for gaming preferences as well as content. Bryce and Rutter (2001) note, the access and participation of females in public spaces are often limited, and this exclusion is reinforced by offensive behavior of males towards females – ranging from belittlement to patronizing female competitors provision and objectification through the display of pornography. Female gamers are also excluded from the domestic settings. Even in homes in which the gaming machine belongs to a female member of the family, it is fathers, brothers, cousins, who take control of these technological artifacts.

[3] Butch: A culturally defined masculine female. The masculine gender expression can fall anywhere on a continuum that includes any and all of the following: masculine mannerisms, male clothing, haircuts, tastes, interest pursuits, thought processes and view of the world (Butch-Femme Network, 2004).

(Sanger et. al 1997 pp. 134-139). This attitude toward technology and its use creates an environment in which female gamers are seen as less skilled than males and technologically incompetent. Such behavior reinforces the perception of computer gaming as a masculine activity in terms of its relationship to its technological nature.

Cyborg, Body and Gameplay

The term “gameplay” is a good starting point to understand playing as a social, technologically mediated, embodied experience. Gameplay is quite an incoherent concept, which is often related to the experience of a player’s intuitive and active engagement with the game’s environment. This term seems to function as something of a marker for how the cultural experience of gameplay exceeds our symbolic vocabulary. It opens out onto the event status of playing…the event of playing, the elsewhere of gameplay, exceeds the limits of our stories about an autonomous self in control of and using technology.

Gameplay changes with the player, the game as a game system, as a machine, as the world it represents and with its rules that challenge the player. Sometimes it is the physical and mental activities, and sometimes it is the speed and abilities, or tactics and strategies. Gameplay includes engaging activities, situations, but it also constantly adjusts, changes, and shapes the game. As a result the player stays in the “flow zone”. What emerges in this interplay of the player, his or her skills, attitudes, habits, practices and the game’s system with its rules, media forms, peripherals, is the gameplay that tries to keep the player engaged every moment. It makes playing the game a physical, intellectual or emotional challenge. The body is always engaged in gameplay, from sensorial perceptions experienced as embodied emotional states with busy hands and fingers, and all the way through to the entire body involved. Gameplay emerges in the interplay of the player, her skills, attitudes, habits, practices and the game’s system with its rules, media forms, peripherals and the world it represents through narrative and procedural representation.

As Ryan (2001) suggests, to understand the player’s experience, two issues are critical, technology as an immersive experience and the presence through which the player feels corporeally connected to the virtual world. Ryan argues that perception is embodied, and virtual experiences count as embodied affective experiences. Consciousness is not

separate from embodiment, which means that physical action and perception are interdependent.

While the player's material, situated body interacts with the various technologies required to constitute gameplay such as wires, boxes, computers, consoles, gamepads, controllers, joy sticks, flight sticks, model steering wheels, guns, mouse pads, headsets, dance mats and Wii boards etc., she is also re-embodied through the avatar within the game world itself. The avatar is an embodiment of the player's actions and experiences and how the game feeds back to the player's actions and progress. The experience of gameplay transforms and challenges our modes of our relations to the technological. There is no more a separation between the human and the technological, but a web of machines and bodies and the enjoyment partly coming from the blurring of these boundaries. As Dovey and Kennedy (2006) suggest, this web gets more complex in multiplayer games, as the player is provided with ingame collective identities. This collective process invokes Haraway's notion of 'networked and collective selves' which is offered to celebrate the technologized bodies and collective identities.

Gameplay as Cyborg Performance[4]

Gameplay involves learning what a player can or cannot do, but learning the rules is just establishing the ability to play it. To make progress the player has to learn how to interact in a way that supports progress, which can be in many forms, adopting different playing styles and approaches during through the game.

Juul (2003) uses the term 'repertoire' and claims when a player masters a game he/she expands his/her 'repertoire' to include to the 'repertoire' demanded by the game. This is an important aspect of playing games: "A game changes the player that plays it". Juul (2003) states that a player will 'have a repertoire of methods to use for playing a game'. Improving skills at playing a game involves expanding and refining the repertoire.

Lindley's (2002) concept of 'gameplay gestalt' has similar components as Juul's 'repertoire'. Lindley suggests this pattern of perceptual, cognitive and motor interaction is the

[4] Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy develop a conceptual framework for understanding the knot of the gamer and the game and untie it as an object of study.

gameplay gestalt and gameplay is performing this gestalt. Lindley claims “the complexity and performative demands of a gestalt lies within a particular range for a specific person in order for a game to be engaging.” (2002)

The idea of gameplay as performance expands when we consider the body of the player together with the nature of machine-mediated play. Then we can see its various forms in a wider network of interactions. As Wilson (2000) suggests in arcade games such as Dance Dance Revolution public performances are enabled, even required. These games even with the most basic programming mediate “a thrilling and spectacular playful-performative display”. Wilson claims that gaming demands “a series of ontologies’ that can conceive the moment of play as simultaneously social, mechanical, neither, both”:

> “It seems to me that the undeniable popularity of gaming comes from the provision of endlessly recursive grammars and vocabularies for cyborg players to narrate performance, play and self.” (Wilson, 2000)

Understanding gameplay as a performance gives us the opportunity to explore alternative subjectivities through our performed selves. During the cybernetic process of gameplay we engage in experiences where embodiment and possibilities are defined by different rules than real life. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) suggests our “other cyborgian selves” that we perform have an important personal, social and cultural significance.

> “Once we gain access to these worlds, the possible protean selves are multiple and heterogeneous. In multiplayer role playing we can imagine a world without our existing racial hierarchies and experience inclusion and affiliation on the basis of technicity alone – unsullied by ethnic, gender or class prejudices, or disabilities. Although, …… these can be imported into the game world through the imagery used in the game or through players’ attitudes to each other, importantly they are not part of the rule set of possible actions within the game. We can role play racial aggressor as a dwarf in pursuit of the elves, often offering complex ways of appreciating the arbitrary and constructed nature of interracial conflict, as fantasy alien clans and species are pitted against one another purely to provide the context for agonistic play.” (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 117)

Taylor in her book "Play between Worlds" is trying to understand the border relationship between the players and the worlds they inhabit and shows that within the game is not only defined by the system’s rules and structure, but there are activities, practices and structure that transgress these rules and structures. (2006)

Taylor gives numerous examples how players are experimenting with creating selves and claims that the identities players construct do not always correspond to their offline gender and identity. Although gender swapping is common in game worlds, what is more worth noting is that they allow access to gender identities that are socially prohibited and delegitimized offline. Although women in EverQuest are constantly engaged in traditional notions of femininity, identity is constructed "in relation to formal play elements within the world such that active engagement, embodied agency and full participation are guiding values for men and women alike." This is a framework that can challenge stereotypical forms of femininity:

> “If we look at some of the examples that we could easily frame as identity performance, we can begin to see aspects often simply rendered as “feminine” (identity play) may have more complex underpinnings signaling a breech in the all too easy feminine/masculine dichotomy. The linking of power and sexuality we find in women’s EQ identities, for example, highlights a broader pleasure derived from advancement in the game.” (Taylor, 2006: 102)

Dovey and Kennedy claim that in multiplayer role playing it is possible to imagine a world without racial hierarchies that exist in real life. You can experience inclusion and affiliation on the basis of ‘technicity’ where there is no ethnic, gender or class prejudices or disabilities. Although it is important to note that in many instances through the attitude of the gamers and the imagery used in the game, these prejudices are imported to the game world. As Dovey and Kennedy suggest:

> “These meaningful affective experiences performed through and with our virtual body (the avatar) in the virtual spaces of persistent worlds contribute significantly to the experiences we can draw on in our perception of self. The cyborg self in gameplay enables us to reflect on the arbitrary or unjust nature of limitations experienced by the material body in everyday life, or in contrast to the dominant representations of femininity that form a ubiquitous part of our cultural landscape.” (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 118)

Haraway (1991) argued if we accept our ever-increasing intimate kinship with the machines, the conventional relationships between body, machine and nature would be weakened. Cyborg figure recognizes the interdependence of biological and technological systems. Haraway’s cyborg figure moves beyond the traditional association of women with nature and offers a new metaphor for subjectivity that can avoid the binaries of nature/culture, male/female. The new technicities that emerge would produce hybrid identi-

ties in which traditional ‘in which the traditional markers of gender, class and ethnicity would be eroded.’ (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 68)

Helen Thornham remarks the cyborg figure is noteworthy because it deals with issues of corporeality, technology and place. Cyborg figure includes the technological as intrinsic to identity of the gamer and takes on ’the embodied gamer as a generative active being who is essential to the creation of these social and technological identity narratives.’ The cyborg figure is significant to gaming because it accounts of a technological and technologized body, including both organic and inorganic equally. However Thornham warns us that potentiality of the cyborg figure is exaggerated in terms of how it wipes out the ‘restricting identificatory signifiers’ and what the ‘technology can do to bodies or identities.’ (2011:113)

The player’s body within the virtual spaces, the physical and the social settings corresponds to the cyborg’s “disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” (Haraway 1991, p. 163) because of its multiple identities lived through technology at once. However Thornham (2011) notes that such a body may be disassembled and reassembled by the technology, but it is also always gendered. It is gendered because the body is always imagined in opposition to the technological, being natural, organic and essential and because it reproduces the gendered dichotomies of action-masculinity and passive femininity. Then Thornham claims, (2011: 113) this is not a produced or performed body, which the feminist theory conceptualized ’but a fixed site essential gender, acted onto by technology’ and suggests a lived and embodied concept of the cyborg:

> “It is a lived and embodied concept of the cyborg, then, which seems most useful for thinking through gaming scenarios. As a lived body, the gamer-as-cyborg is not only always already technological, it is also always already within and generative of the power dynamics into which it positioned. Conceptualized as a lived body, the cyborgian body is also not the unique preserve of a temporally restrictive gaming scenario. Instead, the cyborgian body arcs well beyond the immediate moment of gameplay and (as with the social) is always-already technological, and therefore always-already ‘cyborgian’.” (Thornham, 2011: 114)

As Thornham suggests, the technologies of the screen, the controllers, headsets and dance mats, are usually included in relation with the gaming body, but excluded from the ‘social’ activities of the ‘real’ body such as movement, interaction and engagement. This

creates a false essentialist dichotomy of a ‘real’ body and the ‘real’ social and ‘facilitates conceptions of the technology acting onto the body or the social, continuing the notion of one-way or top down power systems’. (Thornham, 2011: 117)

Thornham evokes a loose conception of the cyborg, a feminist conception when the cyborg is a discursive, a technological and a material formation. Indeed, as she reminds us a ‘cyborgian subjectivity is not only about wires, machines, codes and flesh, it is also about context, embodied interaction and imagined others.’

Alternative Identities and Subjectivities

So do the game worlds challenge the ideas of identity and gender?

Games as virtual environments offer a space in which bodies are not constrained by the limitations of a physical world, allowing possibilities for new identities of gender, race and other species that one can imagine. These possibilities seem limitless at first glance, but while the game’s narratives and code pin these formations into quantifiable, fixed things, the dominant cultural assumptions and strictures repeat themselves within these worlds. However what is important here as Sundén, and Sveningsson note:

> “…to notice that regarding the dominant cultural script of technological masculinity, there is no real distinction between men and masculinity on the one hand, and between women and femininity on the other. In other words, it is a heteronormative, binary logic that binds masculinity to men and femininity to women. In relation to this logic, the only way for a women to become culturally intelligible within technological domains is,… to abandon femininity and instead appropriate and use masculinity, to relate to technologies ’as a man’, and to become ’one of the boys’. Then again, by doing so, the script is broken, since this very move of course challenges heteronormativity.” (Sundén, and Sveningsson, 2011: 203)

It is important to recognize how players develop and construct transgressive ways to overcome or evade the limitations of the game world. Jenny Sundén (2009) considers queer play as a transgressive way of playing and demonstrates it as a symbolic act of disobedience and deviance from “dominating ways of inscribing and imagining” the player. According to Sundén queer play is a way for players to regain a sense of identity and belonging. Queer play or other forms of transgressive playing prove that sometimes games like World of Warcraft, fail to regulate playing bodies and virtual worlds like Second

Life provide a place to develop new hybrids linguistically, socially and in an embodied way and this in return might provide an understanding of gender complexity.

This paper has aimed to build a wider perspective around the gender complexity and identity when engaging with computer games and attempted to build a theoretical fore-grounding of a more extensive study on the subject. This paper is also recognition of multistable ways we engage with computer games (and any technology for that matter). However, while the multistability is obvious, it is not indefinite and shows similar patterns. Future research with case studies should help us understand the different patterns that emerge during the experience of different games and gaming technologies. As Teresa de Lauretis claims, technology "shapes our perception and cognitive processes, mediates our relationships with objects of the material and physical world, and our relationships with our own or other bodies." (de Lauretis, 1987: 2) Technologies are created within and contain values, but these “values are open to resistance, negotiation, rereading, ironicising, reproduction or valorization” as Bryce and Rutter (2002) suggest.

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