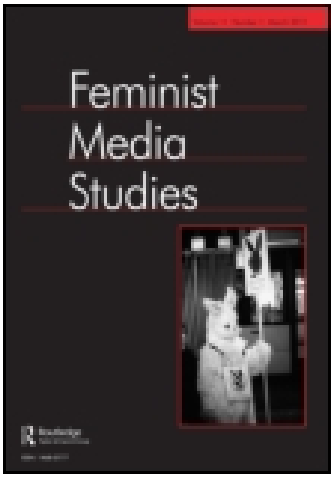

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Girls@Play

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GIRLS@PLAY

An ethnographic study of gender and digital gameplay

Jennifer Jenson and **Suzanne de Castell**

This paper reports on findings from a three-year, Canadian federally funded research project entitled "Education, Gender and Gaming" in which we documented the play practices of girls and boys playing console-based games. We show, in particular, how many of the presumptions and assumptions about "girls playing games" simply do not hold over time, or given a particular context. We therefore attempt to show how our research practices and methodologies help to shape what we have thus far taken as "evidence" or "facts" about gender and illustrate how some of those presumptions might not necessarily hold over time or given different contexts.

KEYWORDS gender; gameplay; girls; videogames; ethnography

Introduction

Over a remarkably short span of time, digital games have come to command an increasingly important role in social communications. Education, skill development, job training, ideology-formation, artistic endeavors and more have all come under the spell of the so-called "stealth-learning" possibilities that digital games afford. So seen, digital games are a significant new medium, and gameplay, on this view, both depends upon and develops a kind of new literacy (Colin Lankshear & Michele Knobel 2009). Alongside such work is that which is looking at the playing of massively multi-player online games (MMOs) as the formation of complex "communities of practice" in which not only learning takes place but important social and cultural bonds are established and developed (Nicholas Taylor 2008; T. L. Taylor 2006, 2008). What we need at this point, however, is a more specific analysis both of the particular kinds of "new literacies" that gameplay purportedly develops, and no less importantly, a rich data set which allows us to look in depth and detail at the particulars of this widely endorsed general claim.

Within the current very much gendered context of the development of digital games for instructional and educational practices, specific questions to pursue are: who plays, and what and how do they play, and what practices (social, cultural; insider, outsider; shared, individual) are being developed by boys and by girls as they play digital games? This paper examines the results of a three-year after school gameplaying club for boys and girls aged 12–13 which looked at game choice, play discourse, in-game and beyond-game activities,

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prior game familiarity and (broadly) notions of "competition" as participants played in same sex and in mixed sex groups.

We are here seeking to move the discussion about games and gender beyond the generalities to which they have thus far been very largely confined, and we begin with a brief overview of the work to date on gender and digital games that has relied on short-term ethnographic accounts of difference/s between girls' and boys' gameplay as well as quantitative data sets that do not consistently "account" for gender. Following that review, we draw on the broad and diverse data set we have accumulated in our own study to enable us to see in a more specific and nuanced way, what and how girls play games, and how these opportunities have been and remain gender-stratified in ways which, notwithstanding clichés about girls' superior "literacy," continue to disadvantage them in a culture that is relying more and more on the concepts, practices and "literacies" acquired through digital gameplay.

Girls in Play: Passing Through

Girls have had an uneasy relation to digital games, whether marginalized prima facie by the men/guns/toys themes and titles such as *God of War*, *Manhunt* or *Stalker* or targeted directly by pink box titles like *Rockett's New School*, *Barbie: Horseshow* or *Mary Kate and Ashley: Sweet 16* that, although packaged "pink" and "cute," are not necessarily "fun." This is not to say that girls have not played and do not play digital games, but their market-defined relation to those games, the access that they have to the technology to play them, and the kinds of games that they choose to play once they gain access are all highly contextually dependent and not necessarily supported by a larger cultural engagement with that new media form (Diane Carr 2005; Justine Cassell & Henry Jenkins 1998; Jill Denner 2007; Carrie Heeter & Brian Winn 2008; Yasmin B. Kafai 2008; Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner & Jennifer Y. Sun 2008; Nick Yee 2008). *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (Cassell & Jenkins 1998) focused on some of the more pertinent issues at that time, including the development of the "girls game" movement, spurred on by the financial success of *Barbie Fashion Designer*. Here also was a discussion of "player preferences" (1998), that is what sorts of games girls "liked" and "did not like" as well as a more nuanced discussion of the gendered nature of play (Suzanne de Castell & Mary Bryson 1998). Its follow up collection, *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Kafai et al. 2008), is still concerned with a field that remains relatively unchanged for women and girls, as Jenkins and Cassell argue, what has remained the same over the past ten years is: "(1) the debate about whether girls do and can and should play video games; and (2) the concern that women are still vastly underrepresented in the fields that design digital technology" (Jenkins & Cassell 2008, p. 5).

In part, these issues have been answered through the wide use of Sheri Graner Ray's work, *Gender Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market* (2004), which attempts to tackle the question of design of video games for a "non traditional market" (e.g., women and girls), through an essentialized and highly stereotyped account of differences and preferences between male and female players, which unproblematically reinstates the presumption that women and girls have gender-specific "playstyles" and "preferences." This is further exacerbated by the prevalence of highly stereotypical representations of males and females in games, such that both are hyper masculinized and feminized, and the fact that female characters are consistently underrepresented in commercially available games (Berrin Beasley & Tracy Collins Standley 2002; Tracy L. Dietz 1998; James D. Ivory 2006; Jeroen Jansz

& Raynel G. Martis 2007; Nicole Martins, Dmitri C. Williams, Kristen Harrison & Rabindra A. Ratan 2009).

Looking to playstyles, preferences, and availability of female avatars to play with as answers to when, where, how and under what conditions women typically play games is, we argue, a methodologically retrograde move which cannot help but obscure rather than illuminate what and how girls and women play. This includes whatever advantages may be had from understanding and addressing girls' relative under-involvement in digital games, whether playing, designing, producing or using for "serious" ends such as promoting technological interest and ability.

While girls certainly have been and still are less visible as gamers, that is not to say they are not playing (Jo Bryce & Jason Rutter 2003; Carr 2005; Jennifer Jenson & Suzanne de Castell 2005, 2010; Kafai et al. 2009; Alex Krotoski 2004; Helen Thornham 2008; Valerie Walkerdine 2006, 2007; Valerie Walkerdine & Thomas A. Studart n.d.; Yee 2008). Unless and until the kind of detailed and nuanced analytical study of gender and gameplay overtakes the essentializing and evasion of gender that continues to characterize the most widely read and cited work in this field, we are consigned to working within the very same categories of concern problematized more than two decades ago. Repetition may be instructive, but it does not get us very far ahead.

Background

Informed by more than two decades of work which seems invariably to slip back into by now almost canonical assumptions that end by locating differences within a black-boxed and therefore essentialist conception of gender, we have in our own research efforts sought only to remove constraints and to support girls' own enjoyment in learning and playing digital games. We have wanted simply to give them access to the pleasures of such play, and, as much as we possibly could, to simply watch what would happen when we demanded nothing from them and gave them every opportunity we could muster to find as much fun in such play as their male counterparts have so easily managed to do.

From this standpoint, we carried out a three-year, Canadian federally funded research project entitled "Education, Gender and Gaming." This study of gender and digital game-playing was driven by two significant factors previously noted: first, the by-now commonplace recognition that far more boys than girls play computer/video games, and the hypothesis that boys' early and sustained exposure to and experience with gaming might place them at an advantage with respect to computer competence and confidence when they enter and as they continue their schooling. Second, our project was driven by an equally commonplace acknowledgement that, not only are computer-based media increasingly central tools for learning and work, but in fact games and simulations are increasingly being recruited as educational and instructional genres (Marc Prensky 2006). This eager uptake for educational deployment of game-based learning, it is frequently suggested, threatens to compound and intensify girls' computer disadvantage, as women continue to shy away from computer-related fields (AAUW 2000, 2004, 2010; Joanna Goode, Rachel Estrella & Jane Margolis 2006; Maria Klawe 2005). It appears therefore even more urgent that educationally-based research reinvestigates stereotypical presumptions about masculinity and femininity as they relate to digital gameplaying for children in order to better understand the gendered patterns of technology access, interest, and competence and thereby make it possible for girls to participate more fully and equally in

technology-related engagements. Moreover, the relatively new push to design "serious" games for educational purposes might better be informed by as full an understanding as possible of girls' perspectives on and participation in gaming, and about the kinds of games, characters, and overall approaches to "play" that might better engage and involve them.

From this viewpoint, we initiated after school gaming clubs for girls and boys at several public schools in the greater Toronto area, which we ran over a three-year period from 2003–2005. The first year, the clubs ran separately in same-sex groups; the second year, a "mixed" sex group was established but participants, with one exception, self-divided into same-sex groups.

In the first year these clubs were developed to provide an opportunity for girls and boys in the intermediate division to interact with different technologies and play age-appropriate computer games in a supervised environment. Our main goal was to develop areas of play for students in which a group of girls and a group of boys could play whatever games they chose to play independent of one another. In the second year, our intention was to observe girls and boys playing together; however, they self-selected away from one another and indicated clearly that they were not willing to "play together." There was one exception to this division: one young man chose to play consistently with two girls and never chose to play with the boys. We speculated, in part, that he preferred this arrangement because he was the only boy of Chinese descent in the club, one of the girls he was playing with was also Chinese, and, perhaps most importantly, he was the *only* boy who reported that he did *not* have a game console at home and was not allowed to play computer games other than the ones freely available. In other words, this young man's experience level was more equivalent to that of girls with whom he had chosen to play.

The rationale for developing the game clubs was to build an environment that would support research intended to help us gain a better understanding of how boys and girls respond to and interact with popular technologies within a supported same-sex peer group, building on earlier work on single sex groupings and new technologies (Cher Hill 2002; Jenson 1999). In considering the discourse on using videogames as literacy and learning tools (James Paul Gee 2003) our plan was to use these clubs to: (1) study how boys and girls interact with popular game-based technologies; (2) gauge the role gender plays in how boys and girls approach gameplay; and (3) observe and document the kinds of multimodal, multi-literate practices that boys and girls used to interact with and play videogames.

Methods

This study combined qualitative and quantitative methods to generate a more richly detailed understanding of gendered attitudes and play styles in console-based gaming environments, as well as to provide a solid empirical grounding to our interpretations of what we saw in participants' play and play-oriented interaction. We have examined the play styles and interactions while gaming of boys and girls in six single sex and one "mixed" sex after school console-based gaming clubs. Each play session was both audio and video taped, as well as being documented through researcher field notes. Over ninety-five hours of video were then coded for interaction between and among participants and the video game/s. Codes were generated "dynamically" from viewing the footage and were cross-checked for reliability among the four researchers doing the coding. In total, raw video footage was broken down into over one thousand smaller clips of no more than two minutes, which show significant interaction between participants and the games they are

playing and/or participants and one another. Each clip has been coded, and a database constructed which allows both for searching for particular clips and recoding dynamically "on the fly" if a clip has been judged to be coded improperly, or if different coders genuinely "see" different things in the same clip, an important consequence of the analytical medium's affordances to which we will return. Additionally, all participants were interviewed individually and in small groups about their play at home, and were also asked to complete a questionnaire on the same topic. In total, forty-four boys and sixty girls (aged 12–14) were interviewed and completed a questionnaire, and fifty-four young adults aged 22–24 also completed the same questionnaire.

Who Plays and How?

In our interviews, in their answers to our questionnaires, and as we observed them playing, it became clear that nearly all of the young women we were observing had not spent much time playing console games; in fact, even when they did claim to have played, upon further questioning, many would say that they played by "watching" their brothers, or uncles or fathers or male cousins play. In an "on the fly" gaming session, for example, one young women requested that her group play *Need for Speed* (a driving game) because she had "played it before." When the game was changed and her group began playing, she called over the research assistant, saying, "what do I do? I don't get it?" The research assistant replied, "I thought you said you have played this before?" To which the young woman responded, "Well, my brother plays and I actually watch."

In our questionnaires and interviews, it was clear that girls had little or no consistent access to console games (despite every one of them having some version of a console at home), and this was made evident as we watched girls negotiate gameplay on their own, without assistance. Many did not, for example, know how to navigate through the more and less complex beginnings to games, they sought and opened manuals to figure out what buttons to press, and there was a further level of frustration early on as the girls grappled with their own novice abilities in navigating the games. A fieldnote from the second day of playing shows this well:

> There seemed to be a lot more interaction between the girls today. There was a lot of helping between partners when one did not understand the game or the controls. I find that some girls are somewhat impatient with the games as they are learning them. Some girls clearly have more patience and actually take out the manual to read. Others seem to give up much more quickly.

While negotiating the games occupied many of these early weeks for the girls, it was also a time when the researchers were attempting many different approaches to running the clubs, and because of time constraints, it took five weeks before we noticed that we were always setting up the gaming machines. Finally, one day when we arrived late, we found all sixteen girls waiting for us. We asked why they had not started playing yet, and they said, "we didn't know how to set up the machines." When we asked if they had any consoles at home, all said that they did, but that they never "turned it on" or "set it up," so we showed them how and from that time on they were responsible for setting up and putting away machines. This might seem like a small point, but it reminded us that girls/women are often very much distanced from technological know-how and/or expertise. It did not turn out to be the case, for example, that we had to show the boys how to plug in the machines: they

either knew how, or they "learned by doing," but either way, none of the boys ever admitted to not knowing how to set up one of the consoles.

While the kinds of games that the girls played varied somewhat in the first months of the club, by the third month, they were principally playing multiplayer games which allowed either for them to play together on split screens, or, in the case of the run-away favorite game, *Super Monkey Ball*, to take turns playing. Because *Super Monkey Ball* (SMB) figured so prominently in our observations of the girls, it merits a brief description for those readers who might not be familiar with it. SMB was packaged originally with the Game Cube. Like *Duck Hunt*, which was packaged with the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), it is a highly playable, novice player friendly game. In it, players can choose among a number of different "play styles"—a fight sequence, a flight, landing pad sequence, a platform sequence in which the challenge is for players to keep their monkey (who rotates in a sphere/ball) within bounds and through an end point within the time allowed. In multiplayer mode/s players can play, taking turns, head-to-head, and it is the platform level, multiplayer mode that the girl game group categorically liked and excelled in. SMB is a perfect example of a console game that is designed to be both easily and highly "playable" and exceedingly pleasurable.

"Benevolent Competition"

Over the course of our nearly three full school years of observations, we came to see interactions between and among the girls playing at all times in relation to two very different kinds of exchanges: (1) helping and/or competitive, and (2) self-effacing. When female players helped one another, it would be either in the form of advice giving or by taking the controller and helping the player "level up." In SMB, this was easily achieved as players rotated through each level and "life," so if one person was not advancing as quickly, she was usually helped along by her peers. Competition, then, was directed at the person who was excelling, and took the form of friendly banter: "Look out" or "You are going to fall" or "You're going to die." We came to see these sorts of interactions as a kind of *benevolent competition*: never too direct, always somewhat supportive and rarely (in only one case in all the hours of video) meant to undermine the player who was ahead. Even when the girls reached a definite and observable level of proficiency with a game, in any given interaction, we would hear them undermining their own abilities. When they did compete directly with one another, they would most often not comment on whether or not their competitor was a "good" or "poor" gamer, but would instead be more directly related to what was happening in the game at any given time. An example of the kind of frequent self-effacing commentary that we saw from a handful of girls in each group (and by only one boy) is recorded in this field note:

> Chandra and Sherry were playing "NBA Basketball 2004" on the X-Box today. Sherry has some experience on this game console, while Chandra has none. While I was observing them play, I noticed the amount of time Chandra spends complaining and putting herself down. Sherry is very patient with her while she helps her learn the game and the controls; she both encourages and gives her recognition when she accomplishes something.
>
> Chandra, however, keeps saying things, like "I don't know what I'm doing half of the time," "I stole it (the basketball) from you . . . sorry," "But it's (Pac-Man) a beginners game, and I need that," "I'm getting very lazy right now," and "Oh my gosh! Why didn't I score? What's

> wrong with me?!" I have a feeling that, because of the positive attention she gets from the other girls who have to "take care of her," she continues this behaviour. Her behaviour seems fairly exaggerated. Sherry stated that she thinks that Chandra is better than she thinks she is because, at one point during their gaming, Chandra was winning.

The boys we observed arrived at the gaming club with varying levels of console-based play, but all had prior experience playing and indeed there were eight who self-reported playing more than twenty hours a week. In the game clubs, boys' preferences for play were mostly the head-to-head multiplayer games like *Mario Kart* and *Mario Superstrikers* (in the second year). In the first year, when there were no girls present, they also opted, occasionally, to play SMB, although rarely in its turn-based form, but instead in the head-to-head "all play" mini-games that were available. In the second year, in the presence of the girls, the boys never chose to play SMB; significantly that was very much seen to be a "girl's game" and *not* something that they would be seen playing.

The interactions among the boys, then, partly because of the games they chose to play on a regular basis, but also because of their different prior relations with gameplaying were different than that of the girls. Most typically, boys' interactions while playing were limited to: (1) seeking help questions like "what do I press again?" and (2) direct competition—"I beat you," "I scored!" There was far less "out of game" chatter: while the girls would move in and out of the game, the boys would almost always focus on the screen in front of them, and all of their conversations were related to their play.

In contrast to the girls, the boys actively undermined one another, referred to each other as good or poor gamers and established and maintained a hierarchy of more and less proficient players on any given game. For the boys, much more so than the girls, their gameplay was connected to their identity: they were good or bad, skilled or not skilled, and/or a winner or loser. Because their very *identity* as a gameplayer was at stake when they played, their comments to one another, their banter, was often biting and cruel. As one researcher noted:

> Not only do the boys like their video game feats to be acknowledged (like finding a cool shortcut or secret move, or simply being the best), their put downs are of a biting personal nature. I found that what people like to term their "competitive spirit" sometimes gets out of hand in that they refuse to be fair and give up their controller in a big group which often leads to put downs and direct cruelty. This behavior is especially prevalent when the boys were playing a large group (6–8 players).

The idea of boys' ability being intricately linked to their identity can further be seen in the boys' reaction to the game *Dance Dance Revolution* (DDR). DDR, like SMB, has a reputation as an "easy girls' game." One male commented, "Hitting little squares with your feet? Anybody can do that! What's the point in that?" DDR is a somewhat unorthodox video game that has the gamer step on an arrow-marked pad at the appropriate moment to replicate dancing to background music. During the mixed club, girls, with one exception, always played DDR. One day when DDR was not occupied, a male club member decided to try it, seeing how nothing else was available. He danced nervously and awkwardly, fully aware that the research assistant was watching him. When asked if he would play again he embarrassingly uttered "no." It was obvious that he was uncomfortable at being watched while playing DDR because he provided a poor performance in a game that is deemed simple, and within eyesight of his friends. As an experienced gamer, his pride (a) prevented

regular exposure to such a game, and (b) was clearly wounded when he failed to master the game instantly.

"Talk," Gameplay and "Literate" Practices

What longitudinal studies of this kind allow for is a more nuanced, better-developed articulation of the complexities of identity in relation to gameplay. Over the course of this study, for example, player preferences (e.g., what girls and boys chose in any given session to play) changed incrementally but significantly. In year one, the girls' game clubs were overseen by a female research assistant (Master's student, Becky) who had never taught her own class, but was a licensed teacher, and the boys' game club was conducted by a male research assistant (Master's student, Jason) who had taught in a public school for six years. The female researcher had never played console or PC games prior to the project, but took home each of the consoles to try out the games; the male researcher had played games in the past and began a re-familiarization process with gameplaying by buying and playing *Neverwinter Nights* but had not played and did not play console-based games. For the girls' clubs, this meant that Becky was able to provide little in the way of help as the girls navigated (many for the first time) set-up screens, learned how to start games and browse menu options, etc. They eventually did learn these things through practice and trial and error, but they limited themselves to the "easier" more "novice friendly" game, SMB, for their primary play. For the boys, it meant that they did not have an adult audience or sounding board who was able to speak to them using the in game "jargon," nor did they perceive Jason as potential competition as they played. Instead, they turned towards one another to talk about the game, competed head-to-head on games like *Mario Kart* and *Need for Speed*, and waited to play SMB with the same patience the girls exhibited.

In year two, when the girls still had not migrated from SMB and the boys (with a single exception) would not go near it, the research assistant was a fourth-year undergraduate female who considered herself a "gamer." Her interactions with the participants were therefore qualitatively different: with the girls, she was able to help them through the menus they had found off-putting, explain purposes and rules of games, and most importantly, instruct them on the general control mechanisms when playing a game for the first time. The result was that the girls did not *just* play SMB—they branched out to play, and played (somewhat) consistently, *Mario Kart*, *Need for Speed*, *Paper Mario* and *Wario Ware*. When interacting with the boys, she had often played well beyond their abilities in their two favorite games *Mario Kart* and *Mario Superstrikers* and was early on in the club called on to occasionally play alongside them (Jason reported he was never invited to play with participants).

What we saw over time was, first, a demonstrative shift in play practices and game choices by both boys and girls; and second, a very different account of girls and play than has been articulated in the girls and gaming literature, from its initial through its contemporary incarnations. The shift was noted in moving from a girls- and boys-only play spaces from year one to year two. This resulted in a heightened, overt competition displayed on the part of the boys, and on the part of the girls we witnessed an experimental enactment of "play"—they gave each other high fives, pushed at each other and enacted a kind of physicality that was very much absent in their male counterparts. In part, this demonstrative, more overt play "performance" (around the actual playing of the game) was opened up, we surmise, in the shift from a teacher-ly and non-gamer adult presence to an adult peer, gamer presence and (arguably) by the presence of opposite sex peers who were

potential (though not often actual) spectators to gameplay. Second, and over the period of two years, we observed, time and again, girls who were actively, though with self-derision, competing. What was *not* at stake for them in their competition, however, was their identity (unlike the boys) as a particular kind of game player (good). They explicitly disavowed, often through self-derision, any identity as a "good gamer," they teased each other a lot, laughed a lot, grabbed the controller from each other, talked about things outside the game, walked around the play space rather than being "fixed" to the game screen and controls, and in general saw the game clubs as an opportunity to "hang out" with their friends and play, something that they did not have access to at home or in their lives outside the club.

Conclusion(s)

In our surveys and interviews only four boys report playing with girls: all reported playing with other boys, and yet *all* of the girls reported playing with boys and only infrequently with other girls. When girls and young women reported playing games that were decidedly not gender appropriate (like *Halo/Halo 2*, *Grand Theft Auto Vice City*, *Grand Theft Auto San Andreas*, or the like), they *always* reported playing with a male player. In our "mixed" sex club (as we've indicated earlier), only one boy chose to play with two other girls, but none of the other eight boys ever approached any of the other girls to play with them. As we have reported elsewhere (Jenson & de Castell 2008), we think these findings might be highly significant in terms of whether and how for most women, transgressing gender "norms" in relation to playing games, occurs most frequently when it is legitimated by male relations (boyfriends, cousins, brothers and fathers) and therefore does not transgress gender stereotypes nor jeopardize a normalized, stereotypical feminine identity which is clearly outside of the masculine culture of video gameplaying. One young woman we interviewed, for example, talked extensively about her experiences playing games, which she said she either did with her brother or alone. She stated that she and her brother have different games that they are interested in playing, and if she is playing one of her games that he does not like, he will still interrupt her game and grab the controller if she is having trouble. She says that this does not bother her, and that she welcomes the help; she would prefer to have him finish a level for her, rather than play it on her own and struggle with it.

In the third year of same-sex play groups, the girls insistently requested a full year "game tournament," an explicitly competitive approach to their play, and to that end they began in earnest to keep and compare game scores, something that we had only seen among the boys. This obviously challenged received assumptions that girls are "naturally" uninterested in and even averse to competitive play. Both the boys' and girls' groups asked to play together for their last session, and when "teams" were put together, we saw for the first time boys asking girls to join their teams. We had, for the first time ever, freely chosen mixed sex groups, but because these were groups in which girls *really* played, and didn't just watch or "help," this, too, ran counter to everything we had seen before the extensive same-sex play groups began. It is important to be tentative in drawing conclusions here, but what we think we see is a "leveling up" of girls with boys in relation to gameplay, game choices, peer selection, levels and kinds of participation, competition and skill. The "gender differences" so consistently "found" in gender and gameplay studies, and no less "found" in our own initial work with these young people, were far less evident and some of these were no longer present at all, once the girls had been afforded genuine access, support, a "girls-gamer" model, and the right to choose what, when and with whom they would play.

In earlier work (Bryson & de Castell 1998) concerned with developing girls' competence and confidence with new technologies, we found girls-only groups to be highly effective; however, we suggested at that time that such a "step up" needn't be seen as a threat to the normative gender order of the school, which in fact at that time required mixed sex grouping for instruction. We argued, but did not in that limited project determine, that it wouldn't be long before mixed sex groupings for technology-focused learning would be possible without sidelining, discouraging and intimidating the girls, as we saw to be the case in mixed sex groupings initially. Yet, this study does offer support to that supposition: that an "affirmative action" pedagogy of girls-only groups for activities and engagements in which boys traditionally appear to dominate in terms of both interest and skill *can* be effective in "leveling the playing field." Our longitudinal study offers confidence to that supposition to recognize that few of the indices (with the exception of self-ascribed *identity* as a "good gamer") which we had used at the start of the project to initially determine these girls' play preferences, styles, activities, and identities could be used, three years later, to identify gender-based differences with respect to digital gameplay.

Dominant cultural presumptions of progressive gender equality would impose upon those who discern persisting differences, the obligation to seek explanations. That and how these differences are contrived, produced, that they continue to be actively and continually constructed, is not a popular story, and, given that the stories we tell are co-produced by the audiences we address, we should be less than surprised that accounts of gender and gameplay, and the theoretical and methodological props that support and enable these, should have shifted only fractionally since the earliest beginnings of research into this field.

What is so difficult about gender-based work of this kind is to challenge the category of "gender" in order to resist its re-inscription in the very categories that we seek to dismantle—e.g., preferences and play styles. The central problem, then, is to show how and why different girls under different conditions are induced to play different games in different ways—that they chose SMB, in this context, for example, for us held no real significance. Our task is more to find out how to identify differences in gameplay without naturalizing them into an underlying truth of gender. This means refusing question about "preference" in an effort to attend more particularly to how and under what conditions girls and women play the way they do, without attributing to that way of playing in and of itself any enduring or fixed significance.

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