

Gendered differences in video gaming

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Abstract:

The public of video games, perceived as a young, male leisure activity, is diversified; but gendered inequality is still strong. This inequality is examined from the angle of differences in gaming practices between men and women. The results of two recent questionnaires describe these differences and relate them to differences in sociability during adolescence. The consequences on female players' opportunities are pointed out.

Video games are often perceived as a mostly masculine leisure activity. This perception probably matched reality during certain periods, since the first games were designed in the computer departments of major universities and installed in penny arcades, two places of male sociability (TRICLOT 2011). However it often, and mainly, resulted from women's invisibility (LIGNON 2014). During the 1980s and even more the 1990s, video games entered households via personal computers and consoles. The public for these home games was younger (mostly children and adolescents) and had become more feminine, even though gamers were still mostly boys (BRUNO 1993). Over the past twenty years, gaming has become a mass phenomenon (video consoles, number of games, etc.); and the public, though still segmented, has again broadened to encompass adults and women (RUFAT *et al.* 2014). Nowadays, the media often point to this "feminization"; and stakeholders in the gaming industry have taken notice of it.¹

In the past few years, the video gaming world has been a den of "masculinist" social movements, such as GamerGate and its ramifications. This group of players coordinated their actions on social networks initially to criticize collusion between the video gaming industry and the specialized press, but very soon to defend the masculinity of video games by using harassment as a form of action (BRAITHWAITE 2016). Paradoxically, gender-related tensions are strongly present in the world of video gaming at a time when the public for video games has never counted as many women.

Herein, a brief inventory of forms of gender-related inequality will be made not by discussing how video games depict men and women but instead by focusing on players, both men and women, and their practices.

First of all, sex is still among the most important determinants of gaming practices: frequency, terminals used, preferred contents and forms of sociability related to gaming. All of these differ considerably between men and women. Secondly, these sorts of inequality have major effects. During adolescence, the gender-related differentiation of gaming practices reinforces masculine domination. At this age, video games are associated with dominant practices; and more feminine practices are discredited. The enthusiasm for video games costs women more than it costs men, even during adulthood. Women players must deal with stigmata, discrimination and harassment. Finally and more generally, video games reveal gender-related forms of inequality in leisure activities.

¹ This article has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor's approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites have been consulted in July 2019.

Playing video games is a hegemonic practice during adolescence.² Its importance has been assessed through quantitative surveys on leisure activities among youth and on video gaming.³ Nearly all adolescents play at least occasionally. However differences in practices between girls and boys are noteworthy along several dimensions: the frequency of gaming, the sorts of games played and, too, the choice of playmates.

According to a survey on children's leisure activities (OCTOBRE *et al.* 2010), more than 25% of boys 11-17 years old play video games daily, and three quarters (except for 17-year-olds) at least weekly. In contrast, the daily figure for girls is never higher than 8% (7.7% at the age of 11 and 2.8% at 17); and the weekly figure is not more than a third (34.6% at the age of 11, 13.8% at 17). In addition to this overall difference in the gender-related frequency of gaming, these statistics also show that the relation to video games varies during adolescence. Whereas boys play nearly as much at all ages, girls play less and less as they grow up.

Research on teenagers' leisure activities has shown that this is the age when adolescents become more autonomous from their families and that leisure activities contribute strongly to this process of autonomy (PASQUIER 2005). This is one reason underlying the differentiation of video gaming practices. For children, whether boys or girls, gaming is a family activity practiced with brothers or sisters, but without being equal, since girls play with video games less than boys during childhood and since fathers pay more attention to their sons' video games than their daughters'. Nonetheless, the distribution of gaming practices during childhood remains relatively balanced. In contrast, during adolescence, video games are played with peers outside the family. "Pals" replace brothers and sisters as the most frequent playmates for boys — a switch that does not occur in the same proportions for girls, even though they too tend to play less with other family members.

Furthermore, the contents of the video games played diverge. The video games played by girls tend to be less varied, as measured by the number of genres: a median during adolescence of nine for boys and six for girls. Note, however, that the way the very definition of these genres tends to overestimate the diversity of boys' games and underestimate that of girls'. In effect, the classification devised by the video game industry is more detailed for the categories appreciated by men.

Not all adolescents play the same sorts of video games, and major differences exist between boys and girls. Among the most masculine categories of video games are games of shooting, real-time strategy and combat as well as multiplayer online games. Girls play these sorts of games the least (less than 12%), unlike boys (27.5% for games of strategy, 63% for shooting games). In contrast, girls tend, somewhat more than boys, to play games having to do with puzzles, role-playing, music and dance. According to the Ludespace Survey conducted in 2012, boys more often than girls chose video games from nearly all the genres; but other studies have reported different findings. On the basis of a sample of middle and high school students in Rhône-Alpes Region, Fanny Lignon (2014) has reported that the sorts of video games with a mostly feminine public are games of dance, music, and puzzles along with "classical" games.

At adolescence, gender-related differences in video gaming tend to define masculine practices as more "engaged", *i.e.*, more frequent, more intensive and involving "real" video games related to the player's sense of identity (Paaßen *et al.* 2016). Girls more often play occasionally and turn toward other sorts of games. This is a tendency, not a split since girls (though less often) might be very engaged; and boys, less so. Since age strongly determines gaming, adolescent girls are much more engaged in video games than the majority of the population. They are more engaged than men except for young adult men and adolescent boys. However the aforementioned tendency is often taken to be a dichotomy. The stereotype of "the gamer" (*i.e.*, intensive players) as a young man still persists (PAAßEN *et al.* 2016).

² These three paragraphs borrow heavily from Coavoux (2019).

³ In particular, the surveys: "L'enfance des loisirs" of a panel of participants (OCTOBRE *et al.* 2010); and "Ludespace" (ANR 2011 JSH 001 01, 2011-2014). Unless indicated otherwise, the statistics are the author's.

Differences in gaming practices and in cognitive representations about video games have important effects that justify talking not just about differences but even about inequality. For one thing, the cost of gaming is much higher for women than for men. As pointed out, the persistence of gaming during adolescence is underlaid by networks of sociability; but friendship has, since childhood, been very gender-related (LIGNIER & PAGIS 2017). For boys, games fit into normal forms of sociability, whereas, for girls, they require building specific forms of sociability devoted to gaming, forms that are often masculine. In sociological studies (KERR 2003), women players usually say that they do not know other women players, that they only know men players.

During adolescence, video games are part of the dominant masculine culture. Leisure activities with a feminine public (TV series, books or even certain genres of music) are discredited (PASQUIER 2005, OCTOBRE *et al.* 2010). The exclusion of adolescent girls from video games fits into this pattern. Some games are put down as being “games for girls”, *e.g.*, role-playing games such as *Sims* or so-called casual games like *Candy Crush*. Even though they allow for an engagement comparable to that of mainstream games, they have such a radically separate place in our cognitive representations that their players are not considered to be “*true gamers*” (PAAßEN *et al.* 2016). Moreover, the women who play them prefer not saying so, as if the names of their games were shameful. Instead, they tend to mention more “legitimate” games (SOLER-BENONIE 2019).

Among the consequences of this association of video games with masculinity are the difficulties that women players encounter while gaming. Much more often than men, they are insulted and harassed. In general, they are labeled with the sexist stereotypes of the gaming world, such as the hypersexual depictions of women characters in video games (DELAMERE & SHAW 2008).

Video games are a litmus test of gender-related inequality in leisure activities. In adulthood, women still play video games less than men; but they more often play board and other traditional games. This overrepresentation of women in the public for games of all sorts is not evidence that women are more interested in games. It follows from their part in household work, especially childcare. Non-video games in adulthood clearly represent intergenerational forms of sociability, mainly within the family (COAVOUX & GERBER 2016).

Gender-related differences in video gaming are, therefore, linked to the differentiation of sociability during adolescence and the association of video game with masculine culture. These differences have long-term effects that form a barrier to women participating.

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