

Balance Boards and Dance Pads: The Impact of Innovation on Gendered Access to Gaming

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This paper considers the impact of innovations in game interfaces, locations, and controllers in considerations of access to gaming for female and male players. The role of gender in video game culture has been considered from the perspectives of production, culture, marketing, content, mechanics, and preferences, and several scholars have argued that we need to understand gendered preferences and play through assemblages and networks of these elements [1, 2, 3]. Access to games is argued in this paper to be a key dimension of these assemblages, as it is the factor that will determine the experiences that in turn shape play preferences that lead to particular game genre choices. This paper considers innovations in gaming, including mini-games in virtual communities and ground-breaking controllers like Dance Dance Revolution dance pads, Wii-motes, nunchucks, balance boards, rock game guitars, drums, and microphones. These innovations mark a move towards a more diverse terrain of gaming that may challenge understandings of video game play as hypermasculine.

Video games have been conceived of as a site of the production of hegemonic masculinity, consisting of violence, competition, aggression, and oppression of females [4, 5, 6], and this understanding of masculinity has in turn generated a tremendous amount of intellectual energy committed to the creation of girl-friendly games [7]. Conceptualizations of gender thus are central to discussions of video games, particularly in how the culture and production of this medium constructs, produces, and excludes or includes certain players via game content, mechanics, marketing, and access.

This paper follows in the theoretical tradition of understanding simple textual analysis of masculinist representation and thematics in video games as insufficient in considerations of gender. It is also informed by a critique of a tendency in gender and game studies to focus on certain games and genres as metonyms for the entire medium (particular first-person shooters like Halo), which may be symptomatic of conceptions and enactments of gender within academic, industry, and popular discourses. Innovations in play style, locations, and interfaces and inputs need to be explored for the access, experiences, and preferences they may allow and foster. What does it mean to play with a mic, guitar or drum kit rather than a controller? What implications do the party or group-oriented games offered on the Wii have for those that may have previously been excluded from inclusion in console play? How does the integration of mini-games in children's virtual communities like Club Penguin shift experiences around access to gaming in the household? This paper considers whether these ground-breaking changes to game interfaces, locations, and inputs can make for better games, or extend certain exclusionary tendencies, for instance in the discourse of casual games like mini-games as less legitimate than hard core gaming.

Research has posited that any gender bias in video games is self-perpetuating in the historical and economic construction of masculinity as the default gender of the form, a construction that has been enacted through not just discourse but patterns of game development, tendencies, practices, and commercial decisions [8]. This paper focuses on how novel innovations, from balance boards to dance

pads, may or may not disrupt this pattern, therefore shifting the terrain of gaming for girls and women.

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