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Disrupting the Gender Order: Leveling Up and Claiming Space in an After-School Video Game Club.

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ABSTRACT
This paper provides an overview of the persisting inequitable experiences, conditions and attributions that have thus far defined and delimited what and how girls play. Breaking away from previous research that sought to catalogue 'gender differences', but really only conflated facts about gender with facts about relative skill level, this article reports on the observed play patterns, pleasures and preferences of girls and boys who were at the same skill level. We argue that if there is to be some hope of changing these de-limited and limiting repetitions in gender and gaming research, it is probably as much or more through technical innovation than through ideological transformation. Strategic interventionist research practice makes possible structurally divergent directions for play that might in time destabilize the resilient ideological containment-field of theory, practice, research and development concerning girls and gaming.

KEYWORDS
Gender; gameplay; education; technology; ethnography

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Despite statistics that demonstrate that girls and women are indeed beginning to play digital games (console and/or video-based), it continues to be the case that gameplay culture hails far more males than females. Evidence for games' masculinized culture stretches across both production and consumption. For example: 1) the video game market is one of the largest entertainment markets, grossing $10.5 billion in 2009, but women make up approximately 12% of the game design and development workforce, with the largest number not actually designing, but involved in human resources and management (Entertainment Software Association, 2010; Wallace & Robbins, 2006; Wong, 2010); 2) female characters continue to be underrepresented as non-player characters in games, as well as being underrepresented as main character choice options; 3) representation of female and male characters in games is often highly hyper-feminized and hyper-masculinized, with few opportunities for representing other differences, including race, ability and disability, and alternative body types (Downs & Smith, 2010; Ivory, 2006; Martins, et. al. 2009; Miller & Summers, 2007); 4) while women and girls might be reporting they buy games, there are few studies that show they are actually playing games with the same earnestness and/or time commitment as their male counterparts; and, 5) advertising in the games industry reinforces the masculine culture of playing digital games, as any scan of cover art or leading edge game magazine makes evident (Miller & Summers, 2007; Burgess, Stermer & Burgess, 2007; Sharrer, 2004). The case remains that girls and women are very much marginal players in this economy and workforce, as well as maintaining a kind of 'outsider' access to the culture of digital game play, in spite of efforts to claim some centrality for them in particular contexts (Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2009).

It is within this framework of a masculine culture of game players that we embarked on the research project we will describe here. Our purposes at the outset of the project were to investigate the relationship between gender and play, and by gender we are not just referring to the play of girls and women, but also boys and men as all too often when the notion of gender has been invoked in relation to digital games, it has mostly been used to refer to studying girls and women (Thorne, 1993). Our study of play began from a very different standpoint than most studies of this kind do in that we did not make the *a priori* assumption that we were going to catalogue gender differences in play types and preferences between boys and girls. Instead, we began from the premise, developed out of a prior three-year ethnographic study of gender and gameplay (Jenson & de Castell, 2008), that what other research has hitherto apprehended as 'facts' about girls playing games (e.g. Bryce & Rutter, 2005; Carr, 2005; Cassells & Jenkins, 1998; Graner-Ray, 2004; Schott & Kamouri, 2006; Walkerdine ,2007), could be attributed to the fact that the girls they were observing and comparing to boys were, first and foremost, *novice* players and that fact could be used to explain differences in play styles and preferences (Jenson & de Castell, 2010a). In other words, novice players, whether

boys or girls, played very differently than more advanced players, with greater similarity between novices of both sexes than differences between girls and boys. Often times when researchers had used comparative samples, they had conflated novice and expert play, and thereby conflated facts about gender with facts about relative skill level.

This study, then, set out to study novice and expert play by both girls and boys, attempting to understand what happens when we leveled the playing field and observed play patterns, pleasures and preferences of girls and boys who were at the same skill level. We report here on years one and two of a three year project of gender and gameplay, 'Smarter Than She Looks: Next Gen Research on Gender and Digital Game Play' that has included approximately 60 subjects to date (20 girls, 40 boys) who have participated in a during lunch and afterschool gameplay club, which also includes a multimodal media production club[1].

CONTEXT

This research is attempting to capitalize on a unique opportunity: a turning point in console-based game technologies has resulted in very different input devices for gameplay and hardware which, in reconfiguring the very material basis of play, has de-privileged those already well skilled using classical controllers, namely boys and men. Interestingly enough, debates surrounding these new input devices have already taken shape in the now well-trodden claims against Nintendo's Wii device not being for real gamers (Ingham, 2010), and its deliberate marketing as a family device (*Get up and play*, n.d.). What the change in controllers has enabled us to do is to examine the novice play of boys (something that is difficult to observe as it usually takes place in domestic settings and among very young boys) alongside the novice play of girls. We hope to help unpack some of the gendered stereotypes that have been attributed to girls' play, which might be better identified as simply the by-products of the early stages of novice play.

At present, it seems that the future of women and digital gaming is moving towards a re-entrenchment of stereotypes as women are being identified as the main players of 'casual' games – easily interruptible or quick play mini-games - and 'serious' games - games for education and training - and possibly also mobile games, using cellphones as primary platforms (Wallace & Robbins, 2006). There is a persistence of themes here: that girls and women will tend to prefer games that do not require control over their own time and can easily be interrupted; that they will prefer games that have some (often socially) redeeming value, rather than those which are for their entertainment only; and, that they will integrate their play into their preferences for communication and sharing with others rather than for solitary play. Each of these themes re-cites the by now deeply embedded ideological presumptions about what girls want, their play styles and their gendered preferences.

This paper provides an overview of the persisting inequitable experiences, conditions and attributions that have thus far defined and delimited what and how girls play, and have evaded researcher's attention by appearing quite consistently yet going unaddressed in the short-term studies which have defined work in this

area. If there is to be some hope here of changing these de-limited and limiting repetitions, it is probably as much or more through technical innovation than through ideological transformation. Here we do not only mean innovations within gaming such as the new kinesthetic peripherals (e.g. Nintendo's Wiimote or the Kinect for the Xbox 360) but also rethinking how we as researchers design and conduct gender and gaming research studies. In particular, what we are signaling here is twofold: first, that a change in game controlling technologies allowed us to see a very different relation to games, one in which boys were not always already familiar, and therefore, more expert than the girls, and secondly, that designing research differently means that we radically altered the conditions and outcomes of our research, and therefore report on a very different set of gendered relations than other research in this area. Technical innovation makes possible structurally divergent directions for play that might in time destabilize the resilient ideological containment-field of theory, practice, research and development concerning girls and gaming. (Jenson & de Castell, 2010a; 2010b)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study of gender and gameplay takes advantage of new controller development, and re-situates play within the classic theoretical framework of gender as socially and culturally constructed (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1990; Haraway, 1991; Sedgwick, 2003; Smith, 1987). In particular, we mobilize some of that insightful and innovative theoretical work to interrogate the apparent mistakes of contemporary work on education, gender and gameplay. A useful beginning is with Butler's analysis of gender performativity, which distinguishes between what appears to be an essential, authentic or inner 'truth' of gender from daily performances of gender conventions that, through their repeated embodiment in actions and self-representations, make those conventions, that artifice, appear both necessary and natural (Butler, 1999). Echoing earlier arguments by feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987) that explanations invoking 'women's *roles*' are in actuality ideological moves that reify conventions and impose upon women expectations and obligations, which a feminist sociology ought instead to be critically exposing, Butler writes that "gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self', whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" (Butler, 1999, p. 178-79).

The biggest pitfall of gender and gameplay studies to date (Bryce & Rutter, 2005; Carr, 2005; Cassells & Jenkins, 1998; Graner-Ray, 2004; Schott & Kamouri, 2006; Walkerdine, 2007) has been the reporting of results in such a way that gender performances, which are always already contextually situated, are reduced to a reinforcement of gendered stereotypes. We are arguing here for a way out of that hegemonic gender double-bind through an empirically grounded investigation of digital gameplay that not only takes into account novice gameplay, but also examines it as a performance, one that is just as important as the performance of knowledge and/or skill.

METHODOLOGY

This research asks a very different question about gender and gameplay: is it possible that what researchers have hitherto attributed to facts about gendered gameplay, such as girls are found to prefer cooperation to competition (Cassells & Jenkins, 1998; Denner & Bean, 2006; Yee, 2006, 2008), prefer playing games that involve a 'save the world' scenario (Laurel 1998), and also often lack the spatial ability (of for that matter, the guts) to play first person shooter games well (Graner-Ray, 2004), might just as well, were cross-gender comparative analyses to be conducted over time, be facts more accurately attributed to novice skill level?

This question was developed out of three years of sustained fieldwork and analysis of gender and gameplay, research that purposely sought to investigate what, how and under what conditions *do* girls/women play games? That work revealed that girls play very differently in different contexts and given different technologies (Jenson & de Castell, 2010b). Therefore, is it possible to show that novice status has actually been conflated with the production of stereotypical facts about gender for over more than 10 years of research on this topic? What are the affordances, that is the technological, contextual and situational possibilities, that are made possible with controllers like the Wiimote or balance board, a plastic guitar and drums? Are supportive networks of distributed competence enabled when, for instance, girl-only groups are led by girl-gamers instead of teachers or researchers? Are these affordances and/or supportive networks different than or similar to classic gameplay using regular console controls and, if so, how? In other words, what kinds of play and play performances are enabled by these alternative contexts and controllers, and how/in what ways does this alter oft-reported activities and patterns of gender and play?

In an attempt to answer these questions, we employed the following methods in our, to date, two year study of gender and gameplay: 1) the documentation and comparative analysis of novice gameplay by *both* girls and boys, and their subsequent movement from novice to expert gameplayer under different social and technological contexts; 2) an onsite, continuous observation and video-capture-based investigation of play practices of both boys and girls, not restricted to video game playing, and not just collected through what have been seriously flawed and reductive interview questions and surveys (Jenson & de Castell, 2010a); 3) a specific examination of alternative controllers (the Wiimote, the Wii balance board, plastic instruments, microphones, dance pads, and others as they become available) as new technologies that hold out great promise for a repositioning of expertise; 4) a systematic, evidence-driven re-theorization of gender and gameplay that works against black boxing[2] gender and allows for surprise in our findings, rather than the re-citation of time-worn, all too familiar, ideologically driven, generalities; and, 5) the implementation of a methodological framework new to this field.

The methodological approach we employed for this study of gender and gameplay, and of gender and technology more broadly, is Actor Network Theory (ANT: see for example, Latour, 1987, 2005; Law, 1992; Law & Hassard, 1999). ANT was particularly valuable as a lens for this study because of the substantial role it

accords to material means- tools, in particular -regarding materiality not as a variable, context or even instrument, but as *agentive*.

To date, we have had over 120 contact hours with students in the gaming and the multimedia clubs at the school, have conducted open ended interviews with over 40 subjects, have recorded their play on a weekly (and sometimes bi-weekly basis) resulting in over 60 hours of footage of both boys and girls play, have recorded fieldnotes from observations of all play sessions, usually from two or more researchers, and have had over 150 participants aged 11-15 take part in a gaming questionnaire that asks about their media habits and gameplay.

In the following sections we report on our findings to date, giving examples of different context and conditions from year one and year two of the project that produced very different kinds of players and very different forms of gameplay. While many of these examples report on the play of girls, we also want to show here how we have seen very *different* play from boys as well, play patterns and preferences that are decidedly *not* part of the mainstream image of what and how boys play.

RESEARCH SETTING

This research takes place in a high needs middle school located in a socio-economically disadvantaged area of Toronto. School statistics on student achievement show that most of the students in the school are considered to be 'at risk' and have bleak prospects for finishing high school, particularly if they are male. Many live in assisted-housing[3] apartment complexes and have never been downtown (although it is accessible on transit), nor do they travel much farther than the local mall or grocery store. The majority of students in the school identify as either African or Southeast Asian, with a small minority of Caucasian and Asian students. In both years, all but one student (white, male) self-referred to their ethnicity as either African or Southeast Asian.

The gaming club took place in the library during lunch and/or after school over the 2008-2010 school years, and relied very much on the generosity and time of the teacher-librarian, as well as a small handful of research assistants to support the running of the club. The library is a large open space providing an ideal setting to set up multiple screens and consoles for gameplay. As the club takes place in a school, all the games that were played in this study were rated 'E' for Everyone, with the exception of some of the music titles that were often rated 'T' for players over the age of 13 because of song lyrics.

While the general setting did not change in the two years, what did change is how the club was organized, who some of its participants were, and, significantly, which research assistants were present, and what their backgrounds and individual approaches to the club were. In order to better illustrate the ways in which we think ANT can help to illuminate the complexities of agents and actors, we have divided up Years 1 and 2 of the project, to show how important it can be to do this kind of

gendered research over time, as well as to illustrate how important those agents and actors can be when working in research contexts.

YEAR 1: BOYS DRUM, GIRLS SING

Not unexpectedly, we had difficulty recruiting girls into the gaming club at the beginning of Year 1. This was partly due to the overwhelming response of the boys to participating in the club, over 70 showed up for the initial information session, and partly to do with the fact that the teacher-librarian was also male in our other study, the reverse was true: female teacher librarian, above average response from girls (Jenson, de Castell & Fisher, 2007). Following that session, the teacher-librarian increased his efforts to recruit more girls to the club, and in total we had 4 girls and 14 boys who participated on a weekly basis from October 2008 to June 2009.

Three research assistants oversaw the day to day running of the clubs: 1) a male senior PhD student, gamer, white and a friend of the teacher-librarian, who had run an afterschool multimedia club the year before; 2) a female first year Master's student, white, who was a trained teacher and who had not played games, nor was she very familiar with them; and, 3) a female, first year PhD student, of Iranian descent, who had a passing familiarity with games, but was mainly focused on assisting with the multimedia club.

Those who participated in the gaming club were also members of the multimodal/ multimedia club (Jenson & de Castell, 2010a), and while their media productions are not the subject of this paper, we mention it here because the clubs were run at the same time and in the same space by the same researchers and with the same participants, and this meant that playing video games was frequently used as an *incentive* for students to finish their multimedia projects. Often, especially for the male participants, this meant that they did not play games until they had accomplished the task set for them that day. While this was not the case in Year 2, this kind of punitive use of games meant that for many (boys) they were not always able to spend the time they wanted playing**.**

What follows here are summative comments on a full year of observations of participants' gameplay organized around central themes that were coded in the hours of video. Many of our observations challenge taken-for-granted notions of what girls and boys play, as well as what their play preferences and attitudes were towards particular games. What is important is that each and every one of these observations took place within a context of play that was regulated first by the active presence of two (white) male, youngish gamers, one of whom was their teacher, and a (white) female research assistant who was also a trained teacher. How that particular context matters, how those actors shaped the research, as well as those we studied, is crucial, we argue, to the shaping of our outcomes and understandings.

Divided Play?

Initially, the girls' game club and boys' game club alternated between lunch and afterschool, inverting when the other group was participating in the multimedia

club. However, after approximately a month, and primarily because the boys had such a comparatively large and disruptive presence, the club was restructured. This meant that although the girls and the boys played games in the same space, they would often choose and stick to one console, and where possible would put some distance between play groups. For example, if the girls were on a console with two other empty consoles next to it, the boys would often choose the console that was further away. The participants however had no qualms about playing next to or joining a group already engaged in gameplay when those participants were of the same sex.

The range of games played included: *Rock Band* (http://www.rockband.com); *Singstar* (http://www.singstargame.com); *Wii sports, Wii resort sports, Wii Fit* (information on Wii titles can be found at http://www.nintendo.com/games); *Mario Kart* (http://www.mariokart.com), and a host of Mario franchise games; and, *Guitar Hero* (http://www.guitarhero.com). There was no discernable difference between the girls and the boys in terms of their choice of games over the course of the game club. A difference could be seen, however, between novice and expert players in that the more competent gamers often played the games that they wanted while the others often had to be content with whatever games, consoles, and parts were leftover. At the beginning of the club it was rarely, if ever, the case that the girls and boys chose to play *together* -- they actively self-selected to *not* play with the opposite sex on most occasions. Later on, however, as the stand out favorite among both groups for gameplay was *Rock Band,* they were in some senses forced into mix-sex play, enduring it primarily because a boy had insisted that he drum or play guitar, removing a female player for that round of play or moving her to the bass or singing part, a custom that novice male players were also subjected to. Where ever possible, this sex division persisted, despite the fact that on most occasions there were both boys and girls on hand to play at any given time (either waiting for their turn or simply observing).

While it was no surprise that the girls and boys chose to play together rather infrequently, what was more marked for us was when they did, and which girls and boys were involved in that crossing over. This happened much later in the club, and one participant, Tressa, was more frequently observed playing with two boys who seemed to accept and invite her presence, especially on *Rock Band*, as neither one of them wanted to sing. In the following fieldnote, Tressa, who one of the research assistants describes as a 'quiet groupie' to the two boys (Henry and Mohammed) who she chooses to play with, is clearly an insider, and when one of the other girls (Kirsta) tried to assert her right to play, she is refused and has to call on adult support to be able to play the next round:

> The duo (Tressa/Kirsta) is being replaced by a Henry/Mohammed/Tressa (on the fringe) trio, with Kirsta left out. Henry and Mohammed whine that they need Tressa to sing, "You're a super star," so that Henry can play guitar. As Henry takes up the guitar, Mohammed puts him on easy. Henry complains, and Mohammed says: "I don't want you to screw it up." Kirsta comes back over to ask if she can play. "No," they say – "you need to keep

> practicing your singing" (on *Sing Star,* the other game that is going at the same time).
>
> After they finish their song, the *Rock Band* Crew insult Kirsta's song ("girls just wanna have fun") and when the *SingStar* song is over, Kirsta runs over saying: "Hey, I'm playing. Don't move, I'm playing now." She tries to physically take the guitar and drum sticks. They won't let her. She yells to the research assistant for help and he calls over that they need to let her play but she goes on to sing one more song with on *SingStar*, waiting for her turn.
>
> I tell them that they have to switch on the next song. Mohammed: "but we're unlocking new songs". Me: "It doesn't matter. Next song, switch".

While this is just one example of negotiating play, what is interesting is that Kirsta does not appeal at all to Tressa for the right to play, even though she has played *Rock Band* consistently with her for the past six months. Instead, Kirsta attempts to go around the boys by appealing to adult authority. These kinds of turf wars marked for us a way that participants constructed hierarchies that allowed and/or prohibited boundary crossings between player groups.

This is evidenced in both boy and girl play, particularly around *Rock Band,* as the following fieldnote illustrates:

> It seems to me that when the boys are not involved in *Rock Band,* the girls take up the best instruments (drums, guitar). They seem to prioritize instruments the same as the boys do. But, when the boys come to join the game, they generally wait until the song is over, and then jump in on the "best" instruments, taking them from the girls. The girls automatically move over to singer and bass when this happens. I don't generally hear squabbles about this transition.
>
> I feel like some of the patterns we're seeing are more centered around dominance, rather than specifically gender. Because it's true that within the boys, there are definite hierarchies too, and certain kids are always put on the lesser instruments, miss more turns, etc. Whereas last week I watched Krista blast into *Rock Band* mid-song, and demand to play guitar. The guitarist protested, but eventually handed it over. Then she played for 3 seconds, put it back down, and walked away. Once it was obvious she was gone for good, the boy picked it back up, and resumed playing.

We view this incident as a case of assertion of power, seizing of it, and then relinquishing it once that Kirsta got what she wanted. Over the next year, she repeats this pattern quite a lot, rising as a dominant figure, not just among the girls, but in the club generally. Note the contradiction in positions between the first fieldnote and the second - in the first, Kirsta seems like she is having to be helped

by an adult in order to assert herself enough to play, in the second, control is relinquished to her without adult interference and during the middle of a song - Kirsta is occupying very different positions in relation to power in both situations, but in both she succeeds in getting what she wants - the chance to play.

Performing Competency

There was little doubt that in Year 1 that the boys dominated the club. This was not only because of their sheer numbers, but also because of their abilities to 'level up' more quickly in *Rock Band*, often pushing female players to marginal roles in the game (on the bass or singing). That is not to say that there were not examples of female players (as Kirsta above) insisting that they be allowed to play, or others being allowed to play simply because they were better singers and/or guitar players. It was very much was the case, however, that, despite our best efforts, as the groups came to play together more often towards the end of the club, the drums and the guitar were nearly always in the hands of the boys. The boys argued frequently over scores, would restart songs quickly if someone made a mistake in the early stages of it, and would actively shout out their accomplishments for others to hear.

That does not mean that the girls were necessarily any less competent (though none of them had the game at home, unlike the boys, 3 of whom played it frequently off site), but they did not pronounce their competency as frequently, and always relinquished control more quickly. The girls were also more likely to be blamed for failures and to feign ignorance, as the following fieldnote excerpts show:

> The girls play rock band alone at first, and then Henry and Mohammed arrive. They wait patiently for the song to end, and then join the game. They take over the "choice" roles: drums and lead guitar. The girls automatically take on the roles of singer and bass. The rest of the session (almost 45 minutes) the girls never take on the "good" parts again. Then the boys play a bit of machismo – who can play what on hard, what song is harder, etc. There are squabbles about whose fault it is that they fail. In general, the chatter is fairly negative and derogatory. Farah is accused of making the band fail because of her terrible singing.
> …
> Kirsta, during one of rare times girl was on drums, accidentally pressed "Back" on the menu. Ned gets frustrated with her, and says "I thought you said you knew how to play this." Kirsta just says nothing and looks confused (even though *everyone* still makes that mistake on *Rock Band*, expert or novice, because of the bad menu design).

The point here is that the boys were not necessarily any better at *Rock Band*, however they dominated the gaming club in such a way as to consistently be asserting that they were. The girls were no less competent, but there pronouncements on their abilities were far fewer, as their presence in the club (with the exception of Kirsta) was also much more muted than that of the boys. The boys demanded and received the attention of their male teacher and research assistant,

and they leveraged that too ready disparity between the female research assistant, who did not game, and the male research assistant who did, to assert their control of the club. In addition, because the female research assistant is a trained teacher, she saw her role as both researcher and as teacher, which meant she spent a lot more time monitoring behavior than the other research assistant did.

YEAR 2: CONSOLE QUEENS

This section addresses how modifications to the research design, including, importantly, a change in the research assistants that oversaw the everyday work of the gaming club, significantly altered the context in which the Year 2 club members played games. Unlike Year 1, in which we had an over-representation of boys, and that critical mass led to their dominating the club and its spaces, Year 2 was essentially an environment dominated by females, which is rarely the case in these types of studies (Jenson & de Castell, 2010a; Jenson & de Castell, 2010b; Selywn, 2007; Walkerdine, 2007; Williams, et al., 2009) or in play settings more generally (Thorne, 1993).

The Year 2 gaming club operated once a week during the lunch hour with two significant changes: 1) instead of making the club openly available for all students, the first four months were exclusive to female students; and, 2) the male club leader was replaced by a female second-year Master's student who played video games and was competent in other technological/computer related domains. Moreover, the research assistant who helped run the multimedia club in Year 1, herself a competent gamer, was also on hand during the gaming club, and both of these research assistants identified as non-white (one Asian, the other as Middle Eastern).

We initially designated the club as a girls only space, hoping that by removing their male peers (a possible source of intimidation and/or anxiety for female players) we would recruit more girls than in Year 1. The new research assistant visited classrooms, communicating these changes and succeeded in recruiting fifteen girls (11 more than the previous year). By constructing a girls only space, one that deliberately began with girls playing games, we wanted to develop a positive environment that both allowed girls to showcase their talents and/or expertise in traditionally male dominated sub-cultures and disciplines, and also enabled those girls who had rarely played to 'level up' their skills. We have used this tactic in the past (Jenson & de Castell, 2010a), and it is also employed by some university science and engineering departments that have started to create undergrad lounge areas exclusive to female students as a strategy to attract and retain them (AAUW, 2010).

The games that were available were the same as the previous year, with a couple of new titles that quickly became the new stand out favourites, including *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*, *Mario Party 7*, and *Super Smash Brothers Brawl,* bumping *Rock Band* from the regular rotation of games that were set up every week. Interestingly, some participants insisted on using classic controllers and did not always choose to use the latest or newer controllers that were available. In fact, in regards to *Super Smash Bros Brawl*, using a Nintendo Game Cube controller instead

of the Wiimote became the norm amongst the boys, citing familiarity as their rationale for wanting to use a past-generation controller. *Singstar* was also extremely popular and was used during the early weeks of the club to negotiate and determine one's position in the club, which was loosely influenced by gaming competence, but more so by social status outside of the club (namely grade and circle of friends).

Female Leadership and Competition: "That's MY game"

By the third week of the club, several girls, including Kirsta from Year 1, began to dominate. These girls consistently played whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, and directed the play at every station they visited. Interestingly, they were demonstrating the very same characteristics/behaviors that previous research attributed as how boys play, including acting with sense of entitlement towards playing certain games (e.g. the newest game brought in) as well as a more aggressive or competitive play styles (e.g. sabotaging other players, usurping controllers, trash talking) (Walkerdine, 2007). Enfranchised by this leadership position, these girls set the tone for certain gaming stations and controlled how the games were played (which is often observed in co-situated game play between males). For example, if their character died in *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*, they would request that the other players commit suicide so the level would restart and they would be brought back into the game. If this request was ignored, the aggressor would begin to sabotage her peers' play until they conceded or died as a result. These players had no qualms about halting everyone's play to satisfy their own personal gaming desires, and it was clear that they felt entitled to do so. This behavior not only mirrors how the boys from Year 1 behaved (e.g. restarting songs in *Rock Band*), but directly challenges the gendered stereotype that characterizes girls' play style as cooperative, fair, and preferring to play an assistive role rather than aggressively take the lead or direct play.

Of course the rise of these leaders meant that others had to occupy non-leadership positions. The girls who occupied this 'second class'[4] status were younger and did not have a strong personal friendship with a dominant girl/leader. The behavior of the leaders had a significant impact on how the second class girls played in that it felt to us that they were essentially glass ceilinged in terms of how far they could develop their gaming expertise and interests. Not unlike the play experiences of the girls in the Year 1 club, these second class girls often had to be content with the leftover gaming stations, waited for turns that never came at the popular sites, never got to play with their preferred characters, and were forced to give up their controllers more often. The fact that we observed both aggressive and passive behaviors within a group of girls further demonstrates that there is nothing inherent in a person's sex that will determine how they play.

Territory & Entitlement – Boy meets Grrrl

After four months of the girls-only video game club, we decided to split the existing club into two. One continued to be a girls-only club, populated by the more passive and younger girls from the initial club, as well as new female members, and the other became a mixed-sex gaming club, populated by the more aggressive, competitive, dominant girls and new male members.

As was the case in Year 1, we had an overwhelming response from male students who wanted to join the club (over 30 applications). We left the decision regarding which boys would be let into the club up to the teacher librarian, who selected a range of male students, from extremely novice (had no access to video games) to very experienced (owned all possible consoles). Fifteen boys were selected to participate in the club for five weeks each, meaning that five boys were selected to play for five weeks and then would be replaced by another five boys for another five weeks. This third restructuring of the club allowed researchers to observe mixed-sex play, but this time in a context where the girls outnumbered the boys, were skilled players, and felt ownership over, and entitlement to, the space.

Instead of waiting to assess the behavior of the incoming male participants, the girls were preemptively protective and defensive of what they considered to be *their* space. They did so by appealing to the club leader and teacher librarian to keep the club the way it was, which was done verbally and also in the form of a signed petition, and explicitly warning the boys on their first day, without the slightest bit of provocation from the male gamers, that this was *their* club. Here the girls were operating under the assumption that the new male members would enact a sort of game-related entitlement that would be disruptive to how they had become accustomed to playing, that is, on their own terms. For some of these girls, it had been this male sense of entitlement to gaming culture that had prevented them from becoming skilled gamers in the first place (e.g. brothers allowing to watch but never play at home). It was perhaps a kind of instinctive, knee jerk reaction on the part of the girls to view the incoming male players as a very real threat to their constructed gaming space and they seemed to be preparing for an inevitable conflict where their right to direct play would be challenged by the boys, who often assume a natural or rightful authority when it comes to gaming and computer culture. Ironically, it is interesting to note that these girls had been practicing the same entitlement upon the second class female club members prior to the split.

As the mixed club went on, we observed how this open female indifference and hostility towards the male participants characterized and influenced how both the girls and boys played in this club. For example, in striking contrast to Year 1, it was the girls who freely moved between gaming stations, usurping controllers and initiating mixed-sex play teams, with male participants self-relegating themselves to stations that did not have a female presence. Not once did the girls appeal to the club leader about not being allowed to play because of male domination. In fact, observations of mixed-sex game play showed clashes between dominant girls and expert boys who also felt entitled to direct and control the play of the group. In these clashes, it was often the case that the girl got their way.

Although some of these boys were clearly more competent gamers than the girls, and tried to use this fact as a rationale for why they should determine the ground rules for play (see Jenson, de Castell, & Fisher, 2007 for how male expert gamers use gaming skill as criteria for leadership, credibility and respect), the girls always remained in control of how the games were played, routinely dismissing their male

counterparts' suggestions, requests, and attempts to lead. Moreover, the girls frequently bullied the boys into getting what they wanted. For example, during a session near the end of the year, Kirsta moved from another station to join the group playing *New Super Mario Bros. Wii* and demanded that Marvin, a self-proclaimed gaming expert, "give back her controller" so she can be Mario and he instead take controller #4 and play as a yellow toadstool character (in this game the player with controller #1 is always assigned Mario as their character). After his initial refusal, Kirsta physically removes the controller from Marvin's hand during the next level change and he is forced to play as toadstool (a character that is positioned at the bottom of the Mario hierarchy) for the rest of the session if he wanted to continue playing. Interesting too here was her possessive language concerning the controller, which was not actually "hers" in any way except that she felt entitled to play as Mario, who as huge gaming icon is in itself a coveted symbol of leadership.

Breaking through the Glass Ceiling

Similar to how the dominant girls who were protective of their space from the incoming boys, the second class girls, who were assigned to the other all-girls gaming club, were also prepared to defend *their* newly carved out space from potential threats, in this case new female members or the dominant girls from the other club. The restructured all-girls gaming club was initially populated by only five girls for several weeks. This was strange because the club leader had received many enthusiastic responses from female students during the second round of recruitment. When this was brought up during one of the sessions, four of the girls admitted that they had been discouraging potential members from joining the club by misrepresenting the purpose of the club (e.g. telling them that the club was about computers, learning about how to use technology, or was already full). When asked why they had done this, their response was that they were incredibly pleased that they had split away from the dominant girls because they could "finally play the games they wanted, whenever they wanted, without waiting". So while the dominant girls were unwilling to relinquish their control over the space, these newly-enfranchised girls were not taking any chances of being controlled again by other club members, new or old.

After these girls had the gaming club to themselves, we noticed a drastic improvement in their gaming skills. One girl in particular, Hannah, exemplifies this very well. Hannah described herself in the beginning as a complete novice who only had the opportunity to play video games during the club. Prior to the split she was the epitome of novice behavior as she preferred to play in teams, avoided player-versus-player competitions, did not want to make any major decisions, and would frequently pass off her controller to a more experienced peer when she could not achieve the goal herself. Hannah was also very uncomfortable playing with the dominant girls and thus did not get the opportunity to play the games she really wanted. After the split, with the barriers of any dominating/controlling factors removed, she felt more enfranchised and free to determine when, where, and how she was going to play and was able to skill up quickly. While she initially continued to lean on her more competent friends for guidance and tips, she soon stopped asking that they play difficult parts for her, requested to play against her peers

instead of teaming up against the CPU[5], and would want to be included in making decisions during group play (e.g. what race track they should select). By the end of the year she had become a competent and confident gamer, enough so that she asked the club leader if she could also play games in the mixed club to maximize her gaming time. Her request to return to play with the dominant girls and the boys, without her friends, is significant in that she felt confident and entitled enough to return to play with the very people who she seemed desperate to get away from, those who had effectively stunted her gaming skills development and made the experience less enjoyable. Had the club not been split and the limiting conditions of her play continued, it is unlikely that she would have progressed this far.

The glass ceiling issue is not one that pertains only to girls and we observed this happening with novice boys as well, including Rob, a grade six boy who was an extreme novice (he had never played Nintendo Wii before this club). During his five week stint he often chose to play *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*, a leftover station, with another boy, Mark, partially because the competitive play-styles of the expert groups, both the girls and boys, made him uncomfortable. Observations of Rob and Mark's co-situated play is characteristic of play between novice and experts – Mark, who considered himself to be an intermediate player, barrels ahead through the level, collecting coins, exploring secret areas, and killing enemies, while Rob struggles to keep up and stay alive. Although Rob improved slightly as the weeks went on in that he understood the concepts of how to properly play the game even if he was not skilled enough to accomplish this himself, it appears that his major contribution to the partnership was resurrecting Mark when he died so they could pass the level. Because Rob was not very skilled, he never finished a level by himself. There are several parallels between Rob and novice-Hannah including their play style (assistive and heavily dependent on more skilled gaming partners), their sense of entitlement and choice of games (playing leftovers), and even their sentiments towards playing with experts (intimidation). Whereas Hannah was relocated to a space that enabled her to direct her own play, Rob was not, and thus remained glass ceilinged from becoming a better player or an insider.

Without an environment that enables a gamer to direct their play and develop gaming competency, novice players are, arguably, held back in their endeavors to successfully become an insider or expert. A supportive environment is essential, as Selena demonstrates. After the club was split, Selena had to play in the mixed-sex club because prior commitments prevented her from playing in the all-girls club. Selena attended the mixed-sex gaming club twice then stopped coming, citing the absence of her friends (her support group) and the ongoing dominance of others as reasons for leaving the club. Her departure signals to us the importance of environment for developing competencies (also seen with Hannah) and maintaining what others have broadly referred to as interest. It is not the case, however, that Selena was disinterested, but that she did not want to choose to be in the club without her network of support.

Female Dominated Space

What we observed in Year 2 was a gaming environment where girls were in control of directing how the games were played. When boys did not play by the rules set out by the girls, they would be publicly reprimanded for "not playing right" ('right' here meaning according to the girls' standards), disregarded, not included, and generally ignored until they either fell into line or left to play at another station. Boys who did comply with the rules (the main rule being that the girls make the rules) were allowed to play with the girls, yet, like the passive girls from the initial club, still remained second class members, which was clear from their interactions. For example, in one of the only recorded instances of a boy initiating play with an all-girls group, the boy played silently and without disruption to the other players, sitting at least a foot behind the three girls. His behavior was so undisruptive to the girls' play that they were completely unaware of his presence until they realized that the character controlled by the supposed abandoned controller was moving around. The male participant was allowed to continue playing with them so long as he played on their terms and did not try to control the direction of the game. He remained silent and in far proximity for the rest of the session, only speaking when spoken to.

The boys' reluctance to move around and/or play whatever they wanted can be attributed to the dominance of the female gamers, and we argue, to the fact that the girls in this year had critical mass. In addition, and in contrast to year one, the club was now being led by a female research assistant, who not only was *not* trained as a teacher, but who very much could occupy a near peer relation to the participants. Moreover, the girls' had already been playing in this space for four months and indeed thought of and treated the boys not as true members but as guests, despite the change from an all girls to a mixed-sex club.

This outsider or guest status is arguably representative of how females are positioned within gaming culture and in their at-home play. Interview data from this and other studies (Jenson & de Castell, 2010a; Jenson & de Castell, 2010b) showed that there were indeed consoles and games in girls' homes, however they were not accessible to them as they were purchased for their brothers or other male relatives. When they did get the opportunity to play, it was almost always in the company of a male friend or relative, and this co-situated play was a result of parental intervention to let the girl be included (not unlike Year 1).

UNDERSTANDINGS

What we want to signal here is how the context one creates in research, from the research assistants to the participants, dictates the kinds of results we report on. For example, it very much is the case that the boy's dominance in Year 1 was *not an artifact* of boys natural inclination to dominate and take control of videogame play, any more than it was the same for girls in Year 2. Instead, the choices we made about who participated in the project, who was present on a daily basis to oversee the research and interact with participants, and how those participants were recruited *differently* in Years 1 and 2 demonstrates how research design constructs 'results'. We could have, for instance, a very different research story to tell if we simply resorted to the same recruiting methods we had used the year

before, presumed that girls did not want to play and were not interested in the club (which was *not* the case) and counted on reproducing our findings from Year 1 in Year 2. However, what we were able to show, strikingly, is that when we changed the conditions and the actors (e.g. the research assistants and the structure of the club) we radically altered our research results.

For example, the replacement of the male club leader with a female gamer, we argue, was significant because she embodied the types of technological/computer-related expertise that are often associated with males (Selwyn, 2007). The composition and division of duties of the Year 1 research team (male gamers, female non-gamer) appeared to reinforce the stereotypical masculinization of gaming culture in that the male research assistant was the designated go-to person for all things gaming and/or technology related and the female research assistant, who was not a gamer, was on the fringes, more comfortable in the role of disciplinarian. In this context, it may have been the case that the girls and boys modeled their own behaviors and play based on the leadership structure – boys as insiders to gaming/computing culture, girls on the fringes, watching. In contrast, the two female research assistants in Year 2 were accessible resources for the girls in the club and the girls sought out technological advice from them frequently. These inquiries and discussions occurred almost on a weekly basis, with topics such as what consoles and games they should purchase or had recently purchased, what digital camera was suitable for their needs, the capabilities of an iPod touch vs. other handheld devices, and how different technologies worked in general.

The female research assistants made a significant impact on the club members, not only in terms of helping them level up their gaming skills and assist them with other technologies, but also encouraging them to see themselves, and be successful in computer-related (and other traditionally male) domains. For instance, female club members consistently asked the research assistants detailed questions about their education, occupation, technological preferences/skills, and how they got involved in this type of research. This curiosity, we think, demonstrates a positive shift in the club members' views regarding women and technology in that were essentially performing a self-assessment on whether they were in a position to pursue or perform this type of work in the future. This was further demonstrated during a field trip to the university when the girls were brought into close contact with other female graduate students from various computer-related disciplines (communications, computer science, music, design). Once again, the participants demonstrated the same curiosity and asked similar questions regarding their occupations, research, and education, with one participant explicitly asking for step-by-step instructions for what she had to accomplish in order to enter the graphic design field.

CONCLUSION

As Raewyn Connell has so aptly put it, gender is a category that we rely on for our everyday reading of the world: "In everyday life we take gender for granted. We instantly recognize a person as a man or a woman, girl or boy. We arrange everyday business around the distinction" (2009, p.5). Our everyday expectations for what boys and girls can and should do, despite our best efforts to push against

stereotypes are just as demarcated: digital games are the province of boys and men, just as technological fields remain a significant area of study and work. Even in the everyday organization of school, boys are told they do not like to read, and girls are often told they are 'good' because they are quiet.

The central claim of this research is that in the area of gender and gameplay, players need not conform to those stereotypes, however, those stereotypes can be all too easily re-created given the absence of constant vigilance and attention to circumstances. For example, if we had not already seen and taken notice of the vast difference that can be created when a research assistant changes (Jenson, de Castell, & Fisher, 2007), we could not and would not have deliberately set out to reproduce that very same change in this project, with similar results. When the balance of power for the gaming club is shifted to technologically-competent female gamers, the girls in the club respond: they play more, take up more space, police who is allowed in or not, and generally display technological and political competence, interest in games, and knowledge of them. They also acknowledge the dominance of boys and begin to vocalize their presumed entitlement and work to change it.

Ever since Simone de Beauvoir's (1973) classic exposition of the entrenched secondary character of women's gendered subjectivity, it has been apparent that the subject of human communication has been sexed and gendered as masculine. The generic masculine subject in grammar, the understood and taken-for-granted masculine subject of literature (Wittig, 1985), and the constitution of the human individual as male in politics, law and ownership of property has been critiqued and interrogated through first and second wave feminist theory. Given that we have seen the predominance and taken-for-grantedness of the male subject in and through every kind of medium, it *is* and *should be* surprising to create conditions that run counter to this predominance, that indeed interrupt our expectations of gender roles and gendered interests.

Methodologically, we see it as an instantiation of ANT in our work that we should give surprise itself a speaking role in our research, thus: if we are NOT surprised at the outcomes of our interventions in the gender order, then we can deduce with some assurance that we are working not to undermine the secondary status of women and girls, but indeed to reinforce it. Surprise is the canary in our mining operation, and if it is not singing, we are in deep gender trouble.

ENDNOTES

1 The multimodal media production club was run at the site at the same time by the same research team who ran the video game club. In this club, members used digital cameras and movie making software to create a variety of media projects (stop motion animations, still-picture slideshows, video news reports, etc.). A lot of our gaming club members were also members of the multimedia production club.

2 Black boxing is an expression from the sociology of science that refers to the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. It is based on the abstract notion of the "black box," a device, object, or system whose inner workings are unknown and only the input, transfer, and output are known characteristics. To cite Latour (1999), "when a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity" (p. 304).

3 Throughout Canada, the government subsidizes houses and apartments for people with low incomes who cannot afford local rents.

4 We use the term 'second class' to deliberately invoke Simone de Beauvoir's work on the "Second Sex", to signal the hegemony of patriarchy, and to show when and where this is sometimes inverted, particularly when female-only groups are created. That isn't to say, however, that that status was not hard won, nor was it stable -- the girls in Year 2 had to go to a lot of effort to remain in a kind of 'primary' possession of the gaming club.

[5] In video games, CPU refers to any character or entity controlled by the game software.

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