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Jennifer Jenson, Suzanne de Castell

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If someone returns from work one night and announces he has accidentally run over a cat on the way home, that's one thing. If he comes home night after night having accidentally run over one cat after another, it's reasonable to question his affection for cats, and to dispute the extent to which this can be rightly called an 'accident' anymore. -- D.W. Hamlyn (class notes, c. 1977)

This paper is about an apparent inability so frequent as to appear no longer "accidental," in current work on gender and gameplay: an apparent inability to theorize, analyze or interpret gender research in which "equity" takes center stage. This is a question that has been stewing for us for quite a long time. Some years ago, similarly baffled at the apparent inability of otherwise well informed, theoretically sophisticated educational researchers and scholars working on a "gender equity" committee to muster any but the most outdated and soundly-critiqued conceptions of gender equity as "equal numbers of males and females in all subjects," it began to dawn on us that something was going persistently and systematically wrong with work on this issue (Bryson and de Castell, 1993). Now to be clear, it's not that there is no theoretically insightful, radical, intellectually exciting ground being broken in gender studies more generally: for example, brilliant work in queer theory from the likes of Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Donna Haraway amply testifies to the advances in conceptualization that can be and have been made: our puzzlement is about what happens in the move from theory to application, whether in sociology, in gender-based design practices, in gender-based research, in gender equity policy, in women in game studies or in any other arena of "progressive" gender-centric practice.

In this paper, we mobilize some of that insightful and innovative theoretical work to interrogate the apparent "mistakes" of contemporary work on gender and digital gameplay as a means to re-consider deficiencies as E-fficiencies, as deeply-rooted forms of productive "bio-power" (Foucault, 1990) which induce a perception of the constructed and artificial as "natural" and essential, in such a way as to render any kind of profound inquiry inconceivable and, in this way, systematically to disable critical inquiry. In other words, this paper is an attempt to rethink the assumptions and presumptions of work on gender and gameplay in an effort to demarcate more clearly how those are not only implicated in our analyses to date, but also misleading and misdirecting what we could "find" and what might well be present if we had a different framework for viewing. In some sense, this is, as Iris Marion Young (among many others) has pointed out, a struggle over language, that is over the very words we use to describe events, to encode practices, to grammatically shape and give

design to the stories we tell as researchers (Young, 1998/2005). In this attempt to re-think persistent and repetitive “accidents” of theory, we will touch briefly on a longitudinal study (three years) of gender and digital gameplay whose subjects were over 100 girls and boys aged 12-15 (for a fuller description of the study see: Jenson and de Castell, 2007) in order to show more fully the workings of some of these all too familiar discursive “traps.”

A useful beginning in nearly all work now on gender is with Butler’s analysis of gender performativity, which invites us to distinguish 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. Echoing earlier arguments by feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith that explanations invoking “womens’ *roles*” are in actuality ideological “moves” which 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, 1990).

On this view, what the repetition of conventional gender performances accomplishes is hegemony. So seen, this repetition is far indeed from being a “mistake,” an unhappy “accident” of scholarship gone wrong: rather, from this perspective what we are looking at are the deepest epistemic roots of scholarly inquiry in a culturally extremely important area. This would be a different vision altogether, a vision of something working very well indeed, working so well, in fact, that even experienced and accomplished researchers find themselves, ourselves, steering to aporia, mesmerized. What repetition signals, then, at least perhaps in this field, is not an accident, but something quite purposeful, a deeply structured process which naturalizes convention and makes it impossible to see or hear anything other than an ‘inner truth’ of gender that little seems capable of dislodging when discussions move from the esoteric domains of high theory into applied areas like social, technological, and educational research, design, policy, and practice.

In this next section we begin by enumerating some of the conventions and “norms” that are often repeated when writing and talking about women/girls and playing digital games and then show how those “norms” are often mis-interpreted, indeed mis-labeled as “evidence” for a stable “fact” about gender. As Butler reminds us, “Whether gender or sex is fixed or free is a function of a discourse which seeks to set certain limits to analysis or safeguard certain tenets of humanism as presuppositional to any analysis of gender” (Butler, 1999, p.12). Here we examine those limits and presuppositions that delimit gender analysis in relation to digital games.

Cooperation vs. Competition: Is Florence Joyner competitive? Or is she not a “woman?”

It has become a timeworn orthodoxy in discussions of “girl-friendly” game design that girls like to cooperate in their gameplay, whereas boys like to compete (Cassells and

Jenkins, 1998). What is far less clear is what “competition” and “cooperation” mean? Whose conceptualizations of these alternatives are running this show? In the work we have done observing and interviewing girls about how they play, and what they like and dislike in video and computer gameplay, it soon becomes clear that the *very idea* of “competition,” for example, is both gendered and contestable. If we think we know what competition means, then we probably have not observed, analyzed, or talked to very many girls playing games. It’s commonplace that many female athletes, for example, are highly competitive, so why would we not expect girls who play computer games to be “competitive”? It’s time we expended some intellectual effort de-coding competition, before going blithely on to invoke the term as a marker of gendered play preferences.

The point we are trying to make here is that there seems to be a systematic need to theorize the axiomatic concepts within which research is attempting to study gender and digital gameplay. Theoretical work, for example, on “competition” demonstrates its “essentially contested” character (M. Fielding, 1976, after W.B. Gallie, 1956); it’s meaning is neither transparent nor persistent, so it’s important to sort out what “competition” means. We obviously do not refer by this term to the structure of the games played, since many of the games girls like and choose to play are “competitive” in their structure. In *Super Monkey Ball*, for example, you have to fly more accurately, race faster, rollover more bananas and so on, than your fellow players. Even if you are playing solo, you are challenged by the game itself to get the highest score, even if it’s only relative to your own last highest score. Wherever there is scoring, there is competition of at least this kind. Is there any videogame that doesn’t have some form of competition inbuilt?

In fact, of course, many girls do like, even “love” competitive gameplay. Many girls we interviewed (over 80) said that they enjoy the same kinds of competitive gameplay boys do: fighting, beating, racing against one another, building higher, faster, deeper, longer, accumulating the most points, knocking out opponents, all that. Many other girls seem to love to play with others, but their competition takes a rather different, not necessarily gender-specific, form -- what one of our research assistants designated “benevolent competition.” When girls in our study played in this benevolently competitive way, they are still very much “competing,” however, they are also supporting, encouraging and even helping their playmates to succeed in the game. The point is that they *are* competing. They are playing competitively in the ways enabled and supported for girls. That means only that these girls, and girls like them, are competing in ways socially regulated as appropriate to and acceptable for them “as girls.” If their competition took the same form as that of their brothers, this might be cause for trouble on all sides. What this account doesn’t do---- and unless we already attain equality of access and experience, never can do -- is tell us about “gender differences in girl-friendly game design” (Graner-Ray, 2004). If the very terms of our calculations, our axiomatic concepts and foundational practices, embody and express and re-cite hegemonic rules, we will continue to define for women and girls, activities, dispositions, aspirations and accomplishments in the terms of what these are and mean for boys and men. The problem is one of terms and turf. If we define the matter from the outset in terms that describe only what happens on male turf, we are unlikely to illuminate much about the situation as it is possible for women. As Butler elsewhere explained, the state accords rights to those that it then goes on to represent. This is “always already” a hegemonic performance, however worthy or “progressive” our intentions. So our first interpretation of “benevolent competition”,

was in some sense, already predefined and put in binary opposition to how the boys were playing, and led to us mistakenly trying to attribute something about how “girls play” to our repertoire of “findings”.

An example of research intended to challenge and invert the usual way that work on gender and gameplay has been reported on is the work of Valerie Walkerdine, which strongly argues:

many games are the site for the production of contemporary masculinity because they both demand and appear to ensure performances such as heroism, killing, winning, competition and action, combined with technological skill and rationality. In relation to girls, this constitutes a problem because contemporary femininity demands practices and performances which bring together heroics, rationality, etc. with the need to maintain a femininity that displays care, co-operation, concern and sensitivity to others. (2007, p. 48)

It is one thing to acknowledge and work with the recognition of the gender constructions within which children in our studies play games. But to theorize our own findings from this standpoint is another thing, and it demands that we take into serious account how the gender imperatives we are acknowledging work also within and against our analytical and interpretive efforts. It's inscribed in both our *concepts* (e.g. an unproblematically gendered conception of “competition” which is then, necessarily, not “found” in girls' play), and in our *methods*, which misconstrue normatively constrained gendered performances as “data” from which we might literally “read off” truths about what girls like, what they can do, what they are interested in, and how they play. If researchers are prepared to acknowledge that the boys in their studies come into the research situation with more experience and greater gender-investment in performing gaming interest and ability—and, with that, “competitiveness”—they surely *must* also acknowledge that it's necessary to bring girls to a comparable experience/investment level in order to entertain any conclusions about gender-based differences in digital game play. Experience and investment are not “variables” to be acknowledged and then summarily dismissed from consideration. All that can leave us with is re-citation and re-inscription: boys necessarily always already perform masculinity and girls perform and practice femininity. This is likely part of why it is that gender and gameplay studies have told us little in the past 10 years that we had not already “discovered” in the first-gen gender research.

So when we say above, that girls are “playing competitively in the ways enabled and supported for girls” what we are trying to say is not that girls are thereby channeling some kind of hardwired femininity, but instead, clumsily, we are trying to draw attention to the irrefutable importance of *context and knowledge* to their play performances. It is absolutely significant, for example, that in each of the years we studied girls' play that in the first weeks of the club, there is much more “helping” dialogue occurring than direct competition as they familiarize themselves with the games. Later on, for most players who attend regularly, this dialogue drops off and they begin taking up positions as “experts” in particular games. Instead of reading this as “help vs. competition” we see it more as moving from more novice to expert roles, a factor which commentary on competition versus cooperation in gameplay often overlooks.

The approach we propose to this kind of research instead is one that takes the careful work of theorists like Butler, Foucault and Smith into account and begins with a very different premise: given that games have been and continue to be a popular cultural site for play, especially for men and boys, who and what supports their play and under what conditions, and when, how, with whom and under what conditions do girls and women play games? This might shake loose and put into question some of those limiting binary readings of masculinity and femininity that past studies have replicated (c.f. Walkerdine, 1998, 2007; Graner Ray. 2004).

From Novice to Expert: Another account of gendered “differences”

In our own work on gender and gameplay, taking differences in experience and investment seriously into account has radically altered our own perceptions of our subjects, our data, and our methods.

Observing youth between 12 and 13 for over three years as they learn and play console games, we saw a wide *range* of performances: from hypermasculinity to hyperfemininity from *both* girls and boys. So we came to see games less as a site for the production of “contemporary masculinity” than as a leisure site in which, given time and permission, girls were as eager to spend time as boys. Performance, under these conditions was very much regulated by technological skill: the better the player, the less “performance” *per se*.

For example, in the final year the girls decided to hold a game tournament and compete directly with one another over a period of a few months (interestingly, the boys did not want the option of competing either among themselves or, later, with experienced girl-players) to see who could achieve the highest overall score. One of the games chosen for the tournament was *Guitar Hero (GH)*, which they played on the Playstation 2 using a plastic guitar as a controller. For those not familiar with the game, the goal of GH is to accurately press the keys on the guitar in time with the music; the more accurately a song is played, the higher the score.

Observing the girls play, we noted that initially (that is the first one to three times they played) there was a *lot* of chatter: how to hold the guitar, how to play, encouragement from onlookers, exclamations when missing notes, and quite a lot of self-effacing commentary like “I suck/I can’t do this/This is too hard”. Not too much later, as the girls began (en masse) to master the game, the chatter died away, and we observed many play sessions with very little talk, other than “I missed/Oh Crap/That Sucked”. All of the self-deprecating talk had nearly vanished, and the girls eagerly checked their final scores to see who had won in “head to head” competition. Interestingly, because GH was a game that none of the boys had at home (at least to begin with, although after the first few weeks, 3 of the boys had acquired GH for their homes; none of the girls were purchased GH) we observed the exact same cycle in their play as we did with the girls – a cycle that we had not fully recognized before as being related so directly to game familiarity. We had, in years past, commented on how little the boys spoke to one another in many of the play sessions, unless it was to show off and brag about their skills, put down another player or ask for or receive help. We attributed some of this behaviour as “unique” to the groups of boys playing, however, it could just as easily be attributed to the *difference between experienced*

gameplayers and novices. In other words, the more skilled the players, the less collaboration, less talk, less self-deprecating commentary, less help offered, all performances which could be (and have been) attributed to girls playing games. So what we've been (mis)reading as research about girls and gameplay as we've said before, could in actuality be research about *novices* and gameplay. In fact, Dianne Carr's work on gender and play preferences maps neatly onto the work we document here. Hers was a study of a girls game club in an all girls' school in which she examined the "relationships between taste, content, context and competence, in order to explore the multiple factors that feed into users' choices and contribute to the formation of gaming preferences" (Carr, 2005, p. 466). She concludes, not with a reinscription of gendered gameplay preferences (e.g. what games the girls in her study most preferred to play), but instead by acknowledging that while it is possible to "map patterns" for play preferences, to do that assumes they are stable instead of preferences being "an assemblage, made up of past access and positive experiences and subject to situation and context" (p. 479). Finally, and importantly, Carr states that "What did become apparent was that the girls' increasing gaming competencies enabled them to identify and access the different potential play experiences offered by specific games, and to selectively actualize these potentials according to circumstance and prerogative. This indicates that forms of competency underlie and inform our gaming preferences—whatever our gender" (p.478). It might well be, then, that competency has been too often misrecognized as some factual attribute for gender. In the next section, we attempt to give examples of how research in this area is to used re-entrench gender "norms".

Re-Citing Gender Research

That research "data" no less embody naturalized hegemonic conventions about gender should of course come as no surprise. So why does it? If pressed, even the most entrenched gender essentialist of girl-game theorists would acknowledge that this must of course be the case, since research is itself a socially situated practice, so must therefore be the "data" it elicits. In the face of this intransigent fact, what have we done in practice to take acknowledged epistemic bias into account in such a way that we might make it possible for our research to "surprise" us (Jenson and de Castell, 2005; Smith, 1989)? In *Tricks of the Trade*, research methodologist Anselm Strauss argues persuasively for the usefulness of having richer "*contra*-factual possibilities" inbuilt in our very research design, from contexts to characters to questions (Becker 1998). So how is it that we appear to "forget," for example, the need to *substantively* control for greater investment and prior experience in studies of what games "girls like best," (Carr, 2005; Walkerdine, Thomas and Studdert, 1998; Walkerdine, 1998) or most typically choose to create (Denner, J., Werner, Bean, and Campe, 2005; Kafai, 1995).

It is by now surely well-understood that the responses people give to questions about what and how they like to play best, necessarily vary as a function of the situation they are occurrently in, what they take the intent of these questions to be, who is asking them---all of these things reconstitute and reconfigure what the question "is"

for informants', and shape the range and nature of the responses they will give in the moment. One telling respondent early in the study commented, for example that:

If a guy asks another guy, "do you play video games?" he'll pretty much always say yes, because guys know video games are about competing with other guys, and about winning. But if a girl asks a guy if he plays, he'll say no, so she doesn't think he's a social misfit who only likes to stare at a computer screen.

And yet when we asked over 80 respondents, almost all the girls replied they played with brothers or male relatives, even though none of the boys reported that they played with sisters or female relatives. These discrepancies only make sense if we presume that what we have are not informative answers to our questions, but informative performances of gender-normativity---unless we alter the conditions so as to make something other than that response possible and visible, that is to say, make it possible for us as researchers to be "surprised" by our own findings. This common enough realization has had a hard time impacting upon gender-focused research, however. A thorough application of Bakhtin's insightful analysis of "addressivity" and "dialogicality" would go a long way towards redressing the studied naiveté of what remain resiliently stereotypical research "findings" about girls and gaming. But improving the intellectual quality of gender-focused research is only a part, and perhaps the lesser part, of what is at stake here.

It has often been the case, for example, when we interviewed girls about their gameplaying that most of them name a few titles, sometimes not accurately, and then indicate that they "play" but they do not always get to choose the game. Interestingly, in one focus group interview, after going round the table and naming games, one girl asked if computer games "counted" and the researcher responded "Yes" to which everyone replied by talking at once and naming off their favorite, free, online games. So, in one way, we had initially asked the wrong question, or they had perceived it as a question simply about console gameplay. A similar incident is reported in Walkerdine (2007), but she interprets the question as being "too difficult" for the respondent to answer, instead of speculating on why that question might have produced an awkward silence on the part of the female participant (the question was "what are your favorite game characters"). The interpretation that seems most direct in both these situations is that what girls like best are, for the most part, "girl games" like the Sims or broadly, "racing games" but those stock answers miss out the surprising fact that by and large the games that these girls are playing are puzzle, online, free games when they have computer time, while their brothers and cousins and male peers are playing console games that cost money, and to which their sisters often do *not* enjoy equal access.

Re-Citing Stereotypical Practice: Other discourses?

One way out of this stranglehold might be to enlist a different methodological approach than has been previously taken, one that was present both in our study and Carr's (though not explicitly stated), which is to take context, actors, and tools into consideration. Actor network theory (ANT), a conceptual framework which investigates human agency as always already "networked" across an intersecting landscape of affordances, both human and non-human, of context, tools, symbols, plants, and animals, is of particular interest to digital games researchers, for whom

ANT offers a full “voice” so to speak, to artificial intelligence in its varied forms and functions. Seth Giddings (2007) explains why actor network theory appears particularly well suited to digital games studies, and promising as a standpoint from which to carry out studies in a field new and under construction. He argues that digital gameplay “transgresses” the boundaries between subject and object through its conflation of game, machine, and player, in particular that: “a full understanding of both the playing of digital games, and the wider technocultural context of this play, is only possible through a recognition and theorization of the reality of technological agency” (p. 115). Employing ANT as a theoretical lens makes this possible, as it “claims both the agency of non-humans and, moreover, the *symmetry* of agency between humans and non-humans in any network (p.118).

It is our contention that ANT seems as well a highly suitable approach to studying gender and gameplay. Take, for example, the description earlier in the paper of the girls playing *Guitar Hero*: there we reported that a shift in controllers actually contributed to an overall gain in competence on the part of the girls. In other words, the change in controllers (e.g. change in technology) actually *enabled* for those particular girls a way in to one of the “cultures” of gameplay. ANT seems as well a highly suitable approach to studying changes in technology design, in this case, new forms of game controllers, affordances that are restructuring users’ interaction with digital gameplay. We argue that the way this restructuring of interactivity is happening suggests considerable changes for both theories and practices of “serious play,” and invites major shifts in the design of games for education and training. By contrast with the intense interest and attention (and fan base!) that has been devoted to game design and designers across all sectors of game culture, the ‘things’ players directly interact with, the “objects” they use to play, and, in particular, the end user’s hardware, has not enjoyed comparable airtime. It’s an understandable human failing to accord primacy of place to human agents in explaining innovation, though it may in fact be user interface design that turns out to be far more significant for advancing new audiences, inviting new players, and thereby affording new possibilities to those previously marginalized.

The “trouble” with studies of gender and gameplay has most frequently been the static attribution of gender norms and characteristics to actors, contexts and artifacts that are always in flux. It is not that previous research has been inadequate or “wrong” it is simply that in the telling of those stories (Visweswaran, 1994), in the recounting of “findings” that researchers have “fixed” gender in order to stabilize the network of interactions and the possibilities for troubling gender shifts. Carr’s work resists this fixing: she does not enumerate a list of games that girls “preferred,” nor does she attempt to label “what girls like best”, but there is a whole other stream of work that has been popularized and is recounted again and again at academic game conferences as well as at commercial games conferences in which Freud’s old question of “what women want” has somehow become the holy grail of how to “make more money” in the industry. While money is less an object on the academic side of the question, it gets no less a contested response as at the recent DiGRA 2007 conference, in Tokyo a prominent European academic sitting in the audience following a panel on women in games in which the panelists had detailed the gender stereotypes that keep women out of the lucrative games industry asked pointedly: “Don’t you want to try to present your stuff in a way that doesn’t burn bridges?” Moving past the decidedly retro discourse of his response, what we think he was really asking was, “If you think that it is a problem that more women and girls don’t

play games and aren't in the industry, can't you just play nice and tell us we are doing a good job?"

Gender is and has been for some time a contested site: it is "at play" and "in play" in radically different ways, given different contexts, actors and tools/technologies. What we are calling for here is a way of holding tight to that complexity, to in some sense, "live in the eye of the storm" in a way that opens up possibilities for telling stories in ways that are more faithful to action and interaction. Identity recast in such a way, taking in earnest Butler's (1999) claim that "Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time" (p. 151) might begin to loosen the noose that heteronormative sentiment has had on gender and gameplay research for some time.

The main problem with flawed research is that it can drive flawed practice. Going back to the cat-astrophic driver earlier introduced, neither better night-vision lenses, nor new and improved headlights, nor any other intervention directed at improving his ability to see cats on the road could prove effective if the real problem was a bad "tic" about cats and a deep-seated desire to rid the world of their kind. In a not –dissimilar way, the when "girl-friendly" principles derived from research which forgets itself as gender- performance and mis-reads itself as an "inner truth" of gender, drive "girl-friendly" intervention efforts to engage girls with game play, or with game design, or with games as a route to computer programming, those interventions will themselves structurally re-cite and re-entrench the very inequities they seek to re-mediate. And we should not be surprised if "gender equity interventions" of that persistently if unwittingly conservative kind are those most highly and prestigiously funded. We cannot look to practical work, no matter how well supported, whose very foundations are flawed, to remediate problems that remain undetected and therefore unacknowledged from the start. A good first step would be to resuscitate *interpretation* as an indispensable tool for gender research in game studies, to un-learn the stereotypical assumptions, and challenge covertly stereotyped concepts (such as "competition") that have thus far driven gender research in this field, and, by these simple means, to begin to make it possible to discover something *other* than that which we always already "know" about girls and video gameplay, and to be *surprised* about "what girls like best".

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