Brief Report

'Pitching a virtual woo': Analysing discussion of sexism in online gaming

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Abstract

Issues of sexism and gender-based harassment have been divisive within online gaming communities with contested understandings of the presence of these issues, prevailing explanations and potential solutions. This report was prompted by the discrepancy between problematic representations of women observed in online gaming community discussions of these issues and women's rich and complex accounts of their gameplay. Poststructural theory facilitated exploration of the construction of women gamers as important in the reproduction of and resistance to problematic gendered discourses. Analysis illustrates the politics of (in)visibility that women gamers negotiate: limited possibilities for women as 'active' subjects and little recognition of women's desires in gaming motivations. Findings highlight a need to engage with both the re-inscription of women as denoted a 'secondary status' and the poverty of discursive resources available in discussion of these issues for transforming existing understandings.

Key Words

Online gaming, girl gamer, sexism, online community, digital subjectivity, gender and gaming

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Introduction

Gendered patterns of harassment and hostility in online spaces form substantive challenges for women's digital citizenship and necessitate urgent engagement to equip (Jane, 2015; Megarry, 2014). Issues have emerged as a serious problem in player interactions in online multiplayer gaming (synchronous games with simultaneous communication) spaces and communities (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Mainstream media has raised public awareness of these issues (e.g. O' Leary, 2012), but encounters with sexism and/or harassment are often expected in standard play conditions within certain games (Fox & Tang, 2014). Dedicated sites enable players to compile harassing communication (audio, text and images) they have received (e.g. http://fatuglyorslutty.com/press/). These communications, including sexualising and objectifying comments, are considered symptomatic of a pervasive misogynistic culture (Salter & Blodgett, 2012) unabated by the anonymity available within digital gameplay. Sexism is a divisive issue within gaming communities evidenced by an accumulating number of publicly documented cases in which those speaking out against it are threatened (Jenson & de Castell, 2013).

Barriers to women's participation have also been identified in: the design and content of games; the under-representation of women working in gaming industries and competing at elite levels; and assumptions that women's gaming skills are inferior to male-identifying players (Bertozzi, 2008; Jenson & de Castell, 2010; Taylor, Jenson & de Castell, 2009). Despite this, women are thought to make up approximately 44 percent of gamers (ESA, 2015). Taylor (2003) asks why women enjoy games that may "actively disenfranchise them?" (p.22). Experiences of women's gameplay offer complex accounts

that both challenge and accept problematic gendered scripts (Taylor et al. 2009). Beavis and Charles (2007) found women's accounts were often underpinned by a binary discourse of gender that typified gameplay within hegemonies of masculinity and femininity in gaming, e.g. "men as good at violent games", while also challenging the way their expertise was only recognised within a discourse of women's subordination: "good for a girl" (p. 702). Further, gender identity within games may be dynamic, temporal and open to subversion within the constraints of the specific game (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo, 2007). Royse et al. (2007) cite an example of a player emphasising feminine aspects of self-presentation in the interview while enacting gaming practices traditionally associated with 'masculinities' such as aggression. An appreciation of the complexities of gender, identity and subjectivity in this digital terrain is important for understanding women's participation and citizenship within gaming communities (Royce et al. 2007; Taylor et al., 2009). However, while undertaking a study that investigated how sexism was understood and negotiated in gaming communities we became aware of the pervasive derogatory and reductionist representations of women within discussions in online gaming sites. This brief report provides a singular focus to explore this discrepancy.

Theoretical framework

Our exploration is situated within a growing body of psychological scholarship that utilises various theoretical concepts to investigate gender-based harassment in gameplay including personality variables and beliefs (Fox & Tang, 2014), effects of sex-typed content exposure (Dill, Brown & Collins 2008) and hypermasculinity (Salter & Blodgett,

2012). Determination of the theoretical framework of this inquiry was underpinned by the recognition that online spaces are cultural sites of production, which do not necessarily replicate the micro-politics of offline spaces, and that there is a complex blending of "offline" and "online" worlds (see Shaw, 2013). Similarly to researchers investigating these issues in other disciplines (e.g. Beavis & Charles, 2007), we have found poststructural theory conducive to a nuanced and contextualised exploration and are also cognisant of its applicability for feminist psychology scholarship (see Gavey's 1989 seminal paper).

Within this framework, it is understood that particular versions of subjectivity are promoted, marginalised or constricted within prevailing cultural discursive resources (Davies & Gannon, 2005). Research indicates that gaming socio-cultural contexts sustain binary categorisations of gender identity which position hegemonic femininity and masculinity as polarised opposites, limiting possible subjectivity (Jenson & de Castell, 2013). While certain performances of gender are intelligible within this discursive context, performances that deviate from dominant identity categories may be marginalised (Butler, 2004). Our research is framed by the contention that the construction of women gamers is crucial because it occupies a site of contest between the inscription and resistance of problematic gendered discourses as well as having the potential to forge progressive subjective possibilities (Beavis & Charles, 2007). We used the following questions to guide exploration: 'which performances of gender are intelligible within these texts?'; 'which discourses enable this intelligibility?'; 'what versions of subjectivity are possible?'; and 'how might these reproduce and/or resist gendered scripts?'.

Methods

Data selection

Combining immersion in online landscapes with issue network analysis ('IssueCrawler'

software) enabled identification of networked multiplayer gaming communities and key

discussion sites (e.g. http://fatuglyorslutty.com/press/) (Shaw, 2013). Over a 6-month

period (2014-2015) publicly available multimodal data were collected in which online

discussion referred to sexism and/or gender-based harassment directed towards self-

defining women players relating to online multiplayer gaming activities or culture.

From within this corpus, a data subset was generated of discussion texts focused

on women as gamers or as part of gaming communities and their gameplay. This resulted

in a collection of 19 individual texts (ranging from small excerpts such as blogs to entire

discussion threads) primarily comprised of written texts, but including a small number of

videos and one audiocast, which were transcribed. Ethical approval was granted by the

Australian Institute of Psychology.

Data analysis

Consistent with the theoretical framework, critical discourse analysis was used to

examine the data subset (Parker, 1992). The analytical procedure provides a series of

steps to identify the construction of subjects and objects within the text and to examine

relationships between them such as the construction of "women gamers". This entailed

consideration of how these constructions become intelligible within the discursive

context (including dominant and alternative gendered discourses). Of particular salience

for our work was exploration of the ways subjects were constructed through their relations to other subjects (e.g. understanding 'girl gamers' contrasted with primary male subjects). Importantly this procedure enables us to explore potential subject positions available within such texts and the implications of these discourses for subjectivity (see Alldred & Burman, 2005 for comprehensive procedure). The analysis led to a reading of 'women gamers' as desiring, invisible and active subjects within the texts.

Analytical Reading

Desiring subjects

In the construction of subjectivity in the texts, women's desire to participate in gaming was treated as suspicious and multiple ulterior motives were offered in community discussion. This is considered a cultural trope reflected in the title of the site "You play games? So, you are… fat, ugly or slutty" (http://fatuglyorslutty.com/press/). This assumes women may play because they "have nothing better to do, because [they]'re forever alone". Often (hetero)sexist scripts underpinned proposed motives for women's participation, such as "flaunting" gender and/or sexuality for male players' attentions. This is of particular concern, given reporting of sexual harassment and unwelcome advances such as being "asked questions on sexual positions". This was also rejected and satirised in discussion as follows:

> Perhaps you're secretly just hoping to meet the perfect man over Xbox live […] There are
> persistent fellows willing to pitch virtual woo at you

Another proposed ulterior motive was that women wish to be unique by gaming differentiating them from non-gaming women:

> some girls have a need to state how different they are from other girls […] as if that somehow makes them superior

> some try to latch on to "guy stuff" because they've noticed that typical female stuff is trivialized

"Guy stuff" explicitly positions gaming as a masculine pursuit in many of the texts examined whereas women's presence was questioned.

These problematic suggested motivations for women's gaming obscure women's own desire to game. As one discussant put it:

> It seems outrageous that female gamers like to game just because it's fun! Surely it must be for an alternative reason?

There is a lack of appreciation for and occasional absence of the complexities of women's desire in the texts analysed. Where research has explored such issues with women, a complex picture emerges connecting passion, desire for mastery, escapism and sheer enjoyment with different gamer identities and types of games (Royse et al. 2007).

Invisible subjects

Visibility and expression of female/feminine gendered status in gaming environments was fundamental to the construction of women gamers in discussions. Correspondence

between expression in the game and in offline contexts cannot be assumed, so expression is perceived. The presence of women in some games was doubted: "You mean a lot of sexually deviant creeps who like to pose as women"; which perpetuates sexism and cisnormativity. Those who were acknowledged were similarly designated within derogatory and body-shaming terms such as "really fat chicks or even fatter men". This links to "gender switching", where it is suspected women's gender is expressed strategically to provoke favourable treatment from men (Boeshart, 2014). There is also the implication that gamers who do not fit dominant 'male gamer stereotypes' must be 'girl gamers' and thus inferior, further complicating the notion of invisible subjects in environments where gamers may play as nonbinary characters

Gender status is expressed in various ways in gaming contexts including avatar, characters, speaking over chat systems and presentation in live streaming. These expressions were understood to potentially identify players to those perpetrating sexist abuse. Some players minimise this risk by:

> playing under a gender-neutral gamertag […] and didn't really use a microphone because I wasn't playing with a group of people I knew

Women report using concealment as a harassment avoidance strategy (Brehm, 2013) and discussants frequently advised that:

> people will only know your gender if you tell them and THEN some men will act like a child's behavior. If you don't want this kind of treatment then stay anonymous.

This quotation assumes a baseline of anonymity whereas previous quotations framed concealment as curtailing full participation. Women report that concealing identity lets others assume their status is male (Brehm, 2013).

Some discussants queried the premise of such advice as follows:

Why should female game players even have to consider hiding who they are to avoid harassment?

The construction of women gamers in these excerpts situates them within a masculine domain in which visibility and expression of female/feminine gender status requires careful negotiation because it is connected with risk, responsibility and potentially challenge.

Active subjects

Women were constructed crudely as either passive recipients or in limited ways as 'active' subjects. They were constructed as 'active' through the potential to reciprocate harassment/abuse within interactions:

This is not some white knight bullshit here and I'm expecting ladies to join in in fighting back.

"White knight" is a colloquial term often applied derogatorily online to describe men seeking to assist women in distress and is contrasted with women's potential to "fight back". Expectations of women gamers to reciprocate harassment/abuse were often cited

It was frequently pointed out that "guys are not the only perpetrators". Women were constructed as 'active' perpetrators of harassment, including towards other women. This tended to be related to the construction of the 'territorial woman':

> at least half of the players trying to give me grief have been other women, annoyed at having another female on the turf where they've been queening it.

"Queening", which is linked to the "Queen bee" concept, refers to a woman in a position of power who is invested in maintaining it. The smaller numbers of visible women gamers was presented as a potential motive for this behaviour:

> women are an acknowledged minority in the gaming community, a few girls can get territorial about their gamer status […] It can be disastrous for all parties involved if another woman stumbles into the same lobby as one of these girls.

While other versions of 'active' subjectivity were noted at times (e.g. reporting harassment to moderators), the two outlined dominated discussion. Discussants in the texts acknowledged the limited ways for women to deal with harassment. Reciprocating strategies aimed at an individual level of interaction were understood to do little to challenge sexism in gaming overall. There was a reluctant acceptance of existing conditions that facilitated these forms of sexism:

> I hate to say it, but we're both just really used to it.

Preliminary Findings

Identification of desiring, invisible, and active subject positions available within the texts offers insight into the problematic ways women are constructed in discussion of sexism and gender-based harassment in the online gaming community. This brief examination posits two preliminary findings salient for engaging with these issues in gaming contexts and that are also worthy of further pursuit in relation to broader issues of women's digital citizenship (Taylor et al., 2009). As Plummer (2003) notes, the future of "cybercitizens", including their "rights and duties", necessitates a "parallel cybercommunity" (p. 56).

Women's minority status was entrenched throughout the analytical reading in underpinning discussions of the 'choices' around women's self-identification practices in games and explanatory frameworks for women as contributing to these problems. Unless otherwise specified, male-identified players were constructed as primary gaming subjects with women, as the only other acknowledged gender, constructed in relation to them. Across the subject positions highlighted differences and similarities to male-identified gamers were fundamental to how women were understood as gamers. Subsequently, women were afforded minority status and a secondary status as gaming subjects. Literature suggests women's secondary status within gaming communities persists despite women's continuing participation (Salter & Blodgett, 2012).

Problematic discourses including (hetero)sexist scripts, such as the suggestion that women participated for male attentions, and cultural stereotypes, including "white knights". These served to constrain possibilities for women gamers across the reading. Evident here is the poverty of discursive cultural resources invoked in these discussion texts. Surprisingly, developments within broader gaming culture that facilitate emerging digital subjectivities are not captured here. These developments include: women as

cultural contributors; professionalisation of women's competitive teams; establishment of gaming communities with a diverse range of identities; and opportunities for alternative gender identity expression and subversion of problematic sexist scripts. Diverse gendered practices for gameplay are available (e.g. nonbinary characters) but discussion about gameplay was confined to cisnormative and heterosexist frameworks within which many identities are unintelligible.

Our work contributes to existing psychological scholarship in this area through preliminary exploration of the disconnection between women's rich and complex accounts of their identity and play and the often limited and problematic representations of women observed in online gaming community discussions of sexism and gender-based harassment. Findings highlight the need to engage with the re-inscription of women as denoted a 'secondary status' and the poverty of discursive resources available in discussion of these issues in order to transform understandings and possibilities for women as subjects

Notes

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