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Playing, Dashing, and Working: Simulated Productive Play in the *Dash* games

Author Keywords

gender, play, productivity, *Diner Dash*, leisure

ABSTRACT

Productivity, to some extent, is a by-product of all video games: game players are constantly forced to be productive with their avatars, making the best of in-game resources. Productive play also often comes from games such as *Wii Fit* and *Brain Age*: these are video games that offer real world productivity in exchange for play. Additionally, other researchers (some on this panel) have examined how productivity is often a byproduct of player communities, with projects such as game modding, skinning, and machinima. In this paper, though, I am focusing on an entirely different kind of productive play which I refer to as Simulated Productive Play: play that mimics real world productivity both in the game narrative and mechanics.

Essentially, I argue that Simulated Productive Play is a categorically feminine gaming style, often reflecting many women's anxieties about play, work, and leisure. Leisure studies has long noted the complicated and tenuous relationship between women and play. For example, Deem [1] discusses how women often feel that they do not have the right to leisure time given the overwhelming concerns of maintaining households and work responsibilities. Hochschild, in her well known book *The Second Shift* [3], discusses ways that time constraints often leads to a "leisure-gap" between men and women. More recently, Green [2] explains that with women and technology there is often a "blurring of work and leisure activities". Ultimately, it is this conflation between work and play activities that has lead to Simulated Productive Play in many video games aimed at feminine audiences.

Specifically, in this paper I conduct a rigorous analysis of the *Dash* games: *Diner Dash* and the spin-off games involved in the *Dash* universe (known as "Dinertown"). These games are referred to by many video game publishers

as "time management games," and provide a perfect case study of Simulated Productive Play. According to Lazzaro [4], *Diner Dash* has particular appeals to women audiences by using emotional experiences that women are familiar with. In addition to emotional appeals, the game's overarching themes of domesticity and work encourage in-game productivity. By analyzing both game mechanics and narratives, I illustrate how these games constantly simulate domestic productivity in their game worlds by having main characters serve, clean, cook, arbitrate in-game disputes, and mollify those around them to gain the favor and love of in-game characters. At times, mechanics and gameplay are in tandem with themes found in the game narratives, which generally encourage work over leisure and the caretaking of others. At other points in these games the mechanics and narratives have contradictory themes, potentially sending mixed messages to audiences about work, leisure, and domesticity. By cataloguing these alternating dynamics through screen shots and rigorous notes of both game levels and cut scenes, I illustrate how these components create some compelling themes about women and gaming that are worth further examination. Additionally, I discuss some possible reasons why Simulated Productive Play is a category that is particularly popular with women gamers.

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Gender Stories: Identity Construction in an Online Gaming Community

Author Keywords

narrative, gender, identity, communication

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study of the way identity is constructed through interactional storytelling in an online community dedicated to *World of Warcraft* [1], and discusses different ways of understanding the performance of gender in relation to this. Inspired by the work of Paul Ricoeur, Sherry Turkle, and Jenny Sundén, among others, the paper argues that by studying the narratives that players construct about their experiences with the game, we can learn about how gender is constructed online. When players tell stories about their experiences with the game, they take part in a narrative construction of identity. In the paper, this theoretical framework, mainly drawing on the theories of Ricoeur, will be applied to a text analysis of storytelling taking place at a *World of Warcraft* guild forum.

Identity is a concept that covers different understandings of self, and the perspective presented in this paper is constructivist and, thus, sees identity as something which is continually redefined in a network of discourses, practices and situations. The way people present themselves and communicate on the web seems to illustrate the constructivist notion of identity very well, as Sherry Turkle has explored in her work on “life on the screen” [4]. Turkle has had great influence on how we think about identity in relation to computers, and specifically how the Internet influences the way we experience ourselves. Especially relevant here is her assertion that because we, as bodily beings, are represented in cyberspace (primarily) by our own textual description, we are able to constantly change the “composition” of the identity we are performing [5].

However, as Jenny Sundén [3] has pointed out, the notion of online identities liberated or divorced from offline, bodily selves rest on a postmodern utopianism, where all material and cultural implications in offline life can be put aside. Instead, Sundén argues that performing gender online can be seen as something exceedingly transgressive, in that identities are communicated somewhere in an “intricate

borderland” between offline and online selves [3]. Sundén looks at stories about gender and sexuality circulating in a MUD, and suggests that talking about gender is also a way of doing gender, in the sense that stories always do something – they actively reconfigure reality.

In this respect, Sundén’s perspective is corresponding with the philosophy of Ricoeur, where a subsistent point is that the construction of narrative is a way to resignify the world, to both interpret and transform the actions taking place [2]. Narratives can be seen as constituting of identities – both of the community and of the individual player. Narrative identity is not a stable identity, but is continually under construction and continues to redefine itself in this way. When we communicate on the web, this narrative way of constructing meaningful identity that Ricoeur sees becomes even more concretized due to the predominantly textual representation of ourselves in cyberspace. Inspired by the scholarly work cited here, the goal of this paper is to explore how players as members of a gaming community – via storytelling about their experiences in the game, in life and with each other – construct identities that are at the same time continuously flowing between different meanings and held together as meaningful coherencies – and focusing especially on how gender is played out in this context.

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Playing Productive: Pragmatic Uses of Gaming

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

productivity, play, mothers, pragmatic-uses-of-gaming

ABSTRACT

What does productivity mean in the context of mothers who play computer games? This paper tries to answer that question using a questionnaire sent out to a number of adult female gamers who are also mothers. The answers received show that mothers' play-related productivity lies far from the game-cultural productivity of clan play or the practice of subversive or artistic modding [1, 2, 3, 4].

The playing practices of gaming mothers can be read as performed, interpreted and expressed – by themselves and others – as producing practical outcomes, producing "family" and family values. Play is turned into a pragmatic activity with practically useful outcomes. To play computer games appears motivated by its sensible functions, its appropriateness in regards to the family's or somebody's "need"; its usefulness as a relaxant and its suitability to fill short time slots rather than catering with mere "fun" or mindless time consumption.

Gaming mothers might be invisible but not unproductive; their culture of participation is different and may even require playing productive.

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The Silent Work of *The Sims 2* Bedroom(s)

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

co-creativity, gender, productivity, *The Sims 2*

ABSTRACT

The Sims 2 is a game with an extremely productive fan base. A big part of this productivity concentrates on creating new in-game artifacts such as clothes, furniture and architecture. These simple visual alterations are distributed and discussed online on dozens of fan sites. One of these fan sites is Radola, a Finnish *The Sims 2* community, forum created by an amateur web publisher. This paper suggests an analysis of interview material with members of the Radola community as well as a broader mapping of the subculture of *The Sims 2* player-producers.

I propose that the characteristics of 'simming' - the practice of productively playing *The Sims* games - and the ways in which it contributes to simmers' identities can be eloquently opened up through the concept of 'culture of the bedroom'. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber [4] originally presented this concept in 1976 as they proposed that a child's or young person's bedroom is a space with great potential for safe explorations of identity. In their research and many succeeding texts, the bedroom has also been considered the primary space for girls' leisure, whereas boys' activities, which often seek to gather admiration and recognition, spread around the public sphere outside the home.

Mary Celeste Kearney [3] has already updated the idea of the culture of the bedroom to cover not only consumerist and 'passive' activities, but also a multitude of user-productivity. The aim of this paper is 1) to discuss the diminishing importance of age in an online community such as Radola and 2) to look at different levels of 'bedroom' in the practice of simming where online and offline spaces are strongly interconnected, thus, to revisit and broaden the concept of bedroom culture to adult players and to spaces outside the (physical) bedroom.

In order to discuss *The Sims* play in particular, the special case of gendered nature of these games needs to be articulated. I will discuss how *The Sims* games are often considered non-games or games that cannot be evaluated or discussed in the same terms of other computer games. A parallel topic in this context is viewing *The Sims* games as mainstream. Whereas *The Sims* remain the best-selling PC

game franchise [2], it is surprising how many of their characteristics have led to infantilization and devaluation of the game. This situation bears a strong resemblance to other media products with a strong popularity amongst female audiences. Thus, one of the aims of this paper is to connect the understanding of simmers as a culture of the bedroom to theories on women's leisure in general and two major works in particular, *Watching Dallas* [1] by Ien Ang and *Reading the Romance* [5] by Janice A. Radway.

This approach draws together notions of women's leisure as invisible, productive, separated and as actions without monetary benefit. It also tries to unwrap some of the reasons why the players interviewed feel outsiders in the larger player community and why places like Radola are such popular meeting points for female players who still constitute a poorly recognized category of players.

Ultimately, this paper concentrates on the player identities of Radola community members. Gender does not seem to be the primary identity of *The Sims 2* 'skimmers'. Neither is Radola established as an exclusively feminine space. However, cultural discourses on *The Sims* game(r)s, female players in general, and real gameness all significantly contribute to their player identities.

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