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Enevold, Jessica

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Mama Ludens Ex Domo: Using Feminist Methods to Diversify Game Culture.

Jessica Enevold

Lund University, Dept. of Arts & Cultural Sciences, Sweden

jessica.enevold@kultur.lu.se

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This presentation illustrates how qualitative methods inspired by feminist critical action research can be used to work with diversifying game culture. Increased diversity is here conceived in terms of including as participants in game culture players who traditionally have been viewed as non-gamers, or as merely supportive cast in families, that is, older women, specifically mothers (Enevold & Hagström “Gaming Moms” project). The overall purpose of diversifying game culture with feminist-inflected methods is to level the playing field – allowing for a more equal game-cultural landscape accessible to gamers of all ages and genders. This is done to add to the development and dissemination of qualitative methods in games research informed by feminist action research, and to answer calls for explicitly feminist critical games research and critical scholarship aimed at counteracting among other things the representational disappearance of the female gamer in popular culture (Enevold & Hagström 2008) and sexist game culture (see eg. Shaw, 2014, Consalvo 2012).

Data on everyday practices of gaming mothers, here epitomized as *Mama Ludens*, provide the empirical basis for this paper. The investigation centered on gaming in relation to time and leisure management in family life to take measure of equality as it took place in practice in everyday life: How did gaming restructure their lives and roles, and how were roles and lives restructured according to their gaming? A “life-historical perspective” (e.g. Quandt et al 2008) was used to construct women’s *gaming lives* using cultural analysis anchored in ethnology, game studies and cultural studies. The project had a declared feminist focus on contributing to equality work and methods were chosen to reflect this intention. The action element was designed to increase engagement and consciousness among the female gaming informants. To address the goal methodologically, the project created: a forum for exchange between female gamers and researchers and gamers in the form of a research blog and planned “pizza parties” (Turkle, 1995). Also, participant observation and play-diaries were included. Gamers were interviewed in depth in their homes or online. The researchers made themselves available to press and Radio as often as possible.

Whereas qualitative work is taken for granted in ethnology/anthropology, only the past decade methods have become a center of attention in game studies conferences and publications [e.g. De Paoli & Teli, 2011; Boellstorff et al 2012]. Performing in-depth interviews, the life-line tool adapted from Davies (1996) was developed. The life-line assisted interviewees remembering and contextualizing their gaming practices in a life-historical perspective. This co-laboratory part lead to these women recognizing themselves as long-time rather than “accidental” gamers (20+ years).

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CONCLUSION

Explicitly feminist, in distinction to “general,” gender research works to link theory to practice and emphasizes bilateral social engagement. The engagement with informants and their increased awareness produced concrete research results. The life-line interviews generated an awareness among mothers that they were neither alone nor “odd.” Many gameplaying mothers had reported being the only mother they knew who played digital games. This meant they prior to the interviews/the project 1) perceived women gamers as a rare phenomenon, and, 2), seldom if ever, identified themselves as gamers. This non-identification corresponds to a well-known phenomenon in game culture (Shaw 2012, 2014). It also poses a problem in affirming what can be called a *mainstreaming* of game culture, which I claim is a *positive* cultural movement; i.e. making gaming available to all players not prioritizing any game genres or play styles allowing for an intentional “blurring” of the player/gamer and casual/hardcore distinctions (Enevold 2011). Using the life-line method, new insights were gained about gamer identities and roles meeting the objective of the project to raise the consciousness among the interviewed female players. Such realizations are a vital step in the struggle for adult female gamers to claiming their place and becoming visible in game culture.

In sum, scholars interested in diversifying game culture in terms of gender, need to work with issues of socio-cultural political relevance and risk operating with methods and explicit feminist perspectives engaging informants and/or lay-persons. To repeat Virginia Woolf’s words from 1938, and the call I issued when first entering Game Studies a decade ago: we must continue “killing the Angel in the House” and let the gaming mother (and her daughters...) come out of it for good: *Mama Ludens Ex Domo*.

Keywords

Feminist methods, life-line, qualitative research, game culture, gender, mothers, *Mama Ludens*, diversifying-game culture, ethnography

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