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Why Girls Play.

Results of a Qualitative Interview Study with Female Video Game Players

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Abstract

Qualitative interviews with 7 female players were conducted to gather information on the motives and attitudes of female users of video and computer games. Participants were asked about the importance of different gratifications of game play, critical incidents that initiated their interest in games and their perceived competence in the use of computer technology. Special attention was paid to potential shortcomings of contemporary video and computer games in addressing female players specific needs and the question whether female users can identify with in-game characters of today's computer games. The results indicate that the motive to win is of minor importance for female players. Additionally, many interviewees reported a lack of support for their hobby, especially from same-sex friends. Identification with the avatar is an important component of the gaming experience for the female players in this study. At the same time, contemporary computer games that are often situated in primarily masculine contexts (e.g. war, competition) make it difficult for female users to identify with in-game characters.

Keywords: Video and computer games; female players; motives and gratifications; qualitative interviews

Introduction

The “gender-gap” in video game playing, i.e. the fact that girls and women show less interest in playing video and computer games than male users, has received considerable attention from researchers from the fields of psychology and communication. Several reasons for female users’ reluctance to play video games have been discussed in the scientific literature.

Several authors draw the conclusion, that video and computer games primarily address the needs and interests of male users. The majority of today’s video games is focussed on competitive situations with users facing either computer controlled antagonists or other real life players. Female players show less interest in competitive situations (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006; Lucas & Sherry, 2004) and might therefore be less motivated to play computer games.

Additionally, the content of the majority of computer games might further deter female users from playing. Many video and computer games feature violent content (Dietz, 1998; Smith, 2006) and women generally tend to show less interest in violent media content than men (Slater, 2003). Furthermore, female characters are frequently depicted stereotypically or hypersexualized in computer games (Dietz, 1998). Many computer games do not feature female characters at all and when women are represented, they are often presented as victims of male violence or have no significance for the game’s storyline (Dietz, 1998). Thus, the content of many computer games obviously makes it difficult for female players to identify with the characters of the games and their narrative context (Norris, 2004).

In addition to these obstacles resulting from game design and game content, social influences are a further potential factor that affects females’ willingness to play video games. Research on socialization of boys and girls shows that computer technology is more accessible for boys than for girls. Furthermore, boys are reinforced to use

computers whereas the use of computers is often seen as an inadequate behaviour for girls (Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Sklorz-Weiner, 1989). As a result, girls perceive themselves as less capable of dealing with computers (Sklorz-Weiner, 1989) and are less motivated to learn how to use computers (Facer, Sutherland, Furlong, & Furlong, 2001). Consequently, video and computer games are still seen as a male domain (Lukesch, 1995). These differences in socialization make it much harder for girls and women to develop an interest in computer games. Even worse, many girls and women might even perceive themselves as lacking competence in the domain of computer use. Additionally, female players often show a lower gaming performance than male players (Brown, Hall, Holtzer, Brown, & Brown, 1997) and thus have a smaller chance for positive gaming experiences. This might result in negative consequences for these females' perception of game related self-efficacy (Grodal, 2000; Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006) and thus make video and computer games even less attractive for female players.

In contrast to previous research that primarily focussed on the question why women tend *not* to play video and computer games, this studies aims at getting insights into the motives and attitudes of women who *do* have an interest in games and who actively engage in game playing.

Motives of game play

Previous research on the gratifications of the use of video and computer games had identified a number of different motives for playing these games. In this section we provide a short overview of the gratifications of game play:

- *Challenge and competition:* As mentioned above, most video and computer games features elements of competition either with computer controlled virtual agents or with real live competitors. In accordance with this, research findings

indicate that the experience of competition, i.e. the motivation to “prove to other people who has the best skills” (Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006, p. 217) is a significant motivational dimension for the majority of players (Brown, Hall, Holtzer, Brown, & Brown, 1997; Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006; Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Lukesch, 1995; Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006; Taylor, 2003). While competition implies the comparison of skill in contrast to virtual or real life competitors, the gratification of challenge is based on personal accomplishment in the game. Solving problems, reaching the next level and mastering the game are important factors of entertainment for most players. In fact, in their study on computer games’ uses and gratification Sherry et al. (2006) identified challenge and competition as the most important reasons to play computer games.

- *Social Interaction:* In addition to challenge and competition video and computer games serve as a context of social interaction for many users (Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006; Taylor, 2003; Tufte, 2003). For player, games can be the source of direct social interaction when several players gather around a computer monitor or a gaming console or of indirect social interaction in the via LAN or Internet technologies in the case of multiplayer online games. Thus, games can be the base for friendships, a hobby to share with other people and a topic for conversation.
- *Fantasy and Escapism.* As Sherry et al. (2006, p. 218) mention, “video games allow players to do things they normally would not be able to do”. This opportunity to take over new roles and try out activities and adventures that

would not be possible in real life is a significant gratification for many players (Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006). Additionally, many players report that the escapist motive of playing computer games to disengage from unpleasant activities or to find distraction from stressful events is an important gratification of game play (Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006).

Research questions

The aim of this study is to identify gratifications of game play that are important for female game players and to probe on female game players' attitudes concerning different aspects of video and computer games such as violent content. Additionally, the identification with avatars in computer games and potential shortcomings of contemporary computer games in satisfying female users' needs is a second focus of the study.

RQ1: What gratification do female game players expect from playing video and computer games?

RQ2: To what extent enable contemporary computer games female users to identify with in-game characters? What shortcomings of today's computer games in satisfying female player's needs can be identified?

Method

Qualitative interviews with female players were conducted to gather information about specific motivations and attitudes of women that actively engage in playing computer and video games.

Participants were recruited in web forums that focus on game related content and discussions. Messages were posted in these forums (e.g. www.zockerweibchen.de) containing the contact information of the research team and the invitation to participate in telephone interviews about the motivation and attitudes of female game players.

Seven telephone interviews were conducted with female participants who volunteered to participate. Participants ranged widely in age from 19 to 37 years and in socioeconomic background. All interviewees were employed or in job training at the time of the interviews. Participants work in different job domains including industrial sales representative, call center agent, teacher and IT support. All seven participants play video or computer games regularly and several times a week. All interviews took about 30 minutes. A standardized set of questions was used to direct the conversation from general to specific issues. The interviewer was free to probe. Questions aimed at different aspects of gaming, including:

- the importance of challenge, social interaction, and escapism as motives for game play
- critical incidents that initiated participants' interest in games, their perceived competence with computer technology and the way they were socialized in respect to technology and computer game use
- participants' ability to identify themselves with game characters and the potential of contemporary games to satisfy female gamers' specific needs and interests

Results

Challenge and Competition

Most respondents made a clear distinction between the challenge of mastering the game and the need to win. Most participants indicated in their statements that for them, winning the game or defeating their competitor is of little importance:

“It is not all that important to win!”

In contrast to winning the game, the mastery of challenges is an essential part of the gaming experience for all our interviewees. Thus, being challenged by the game is a major motivational dimension for the female gamers in this study. Online gamers who play multiplayer shooters in teams highlight the higher importance of playing as a team compared to winning the match. For these women, the social aspect of team playing is crucial. Furthermore, tactical game playing and the intellectual challenge of strategic playing seem to be of high importance especially for online gamers. As one respondent put it:

“You know, you have to play smart! You can’t just run around and shoot at everything. You have to do a lot of thinking.”

Escapism

Respondents reported two different facets of escapism. On the one hand, the immersion into the game and a resulting loss of the sense of time is experienced by the majority of our interviewees, e.g.:

“Sometimes I get so involved with the game that I completely forget time.”

On the other hand, playing games is seen as an active striving for diversion by the majority of respondents. Games are often played to reduce stress or to distract oneself from daily hassle:

“Yes, I think I play more when I’m stressed out.”

Furthermore, taking over new roles and doing things that are not possible in reality is an important source of entertainment for the majority of our respondents.

Social interaction

Especially for online gamers the social dimension of playing is a very important aspect of the gaming experience. As one of our interviewees put it:

“By now, the crucial thing is not the game anymore, it’s the people you play with... you get to know each other.”

Online players do not only play together, many of them also use instant messaging software or voice-over-IP to communicate with other players during the game. Offline players are less involved in social interaction. These gamers report to play with other people less often and know less other gamers than online players. Although these women usually don’t get to know new friends while playing, the games are an important topic of discussion for them and their friends:

“You realize that you play the same games and have the same interests and you can talk about it. But playing computer games did not help me find new friends that I didn’t know before.”

Violent content

Violent content is recognized by all our interviewees. Their reactions, however, differ substantially from each other. For some of the female players we talked to, violent games are not acceptable or at least unattractive:

“War games and shooters, that’s not my type of game. If it’s all about shooting, that’s not the right thing for me, it rather disgusts me!”

Other players are much less concerned about violent video games and even enjoy playing genres that contain violence like multiplayer shooters. For these users, team playing is far more salient than the violent content:

“I don’t think Counterstrike is all that violent. For me, it’s a team game.”

Nevertheless, all interviewees agree that age ratings for computer games are an appropriate way to protect children and teenagers from game content that is not suitable for their age. Some respondent would even appreciate stricter ratings of games:

“I definitely think that age ratings are a good thing. However, in some cases, the ratings are not strict enough.”

Socialization and perceived competence in computer technology

Most of our interviewees indicated that they were guided to playing video or computer games by friends or family members. In most instances, the first contact with computer games was established through a male gamer. Some of the interviewees reported that during their childhood and youth they were less interested in computers in general than their male siblings or peers. For some of the interviewees, starting to play computer games motivated them to get in touch with computer technology for the first time. Especially for those players who were not interested in computers before starting to play, the computer technology sometime causes technical problems or obstacles. On the other hand, most of our interviewees receive considerable support from friends or family when they are confronted with technical problems. Some of the female players report more support from their mothers than from their fathers. In these cases, the mothers show interest in their daughters' hobbies and even try out gaming themselves, while the fathers are less eager to support their daughters' interest in gaming. As far as friends and peers are concerned, our interviewees feel more respect and support for their hobby by male friends. Female friends often have a negative view on the female players' hobby unless they also play video or computer games. One interviewee noted:

"Most of my girlfriends think it [gaming] is pretty stupid, they don't understand why I do it. My male friends it's totally different, we can talk about games for hours! Most of my male friends play computer games."

Most interviewees agreed in their view that female game players' needs are met by contemporary games. From our respondents' point of view, the games industry offers enough games that are interesting for female players. They did not come up with

specific suggestions to make games more attractive for women. However, some of them had the impression that games featuring other content than today's games might be more interesting for women that are not interested in games yet. Still, it was hard for them to name specific content factors that might be interesting for women who are not engaged in gaming yet.

Sex-role stereotypes and Identification with Avatars

Overall, most of our interviewees reported that they identified with their game avatars at least to some degree. As one participant mentioned:

"I have to identify with the avatar – otherwise I couldn't play the game!"

At the same time, the dominance of male game characters is criticized by part of the respondents, while most participants indicated a preference for female avatars. Additionally, most of the currently existing female game characters are perceived as hypersexualized by the majority of interviewees. One participant expressed her dislike:

"They [female avatars] are overly sexualized most of the time."

And another respondent:

"There are not enough of them [female game characters]. And the ones that do exist – you know – they are the creation of male game developers. I mean, no real woman looks like that!"

Interestingly, although most women report a preference for female avatars when offered the choice, this statement is qualified by the fact that most women in this interview study also claimed that the sex of the avatar they play is not of great importance to them. As one participant put it:

“You know, overall, I actually don’t care if it [the avatar] is male or female or handsome or not. It just doesn’t matter to me.”

Additionally, several interviewees indicated that they felt that choosing a female avatar did not have any consequences for game play. Except for the outward appearance, the choice of a female avatar does not change the game characters behaviour or abilities in most games:

“They [female avatars] don’t differ at all from male game characters. I mean, they all can do the same things in the game. And, you know, I think the game play doesn’t change, no matter whether your are playing a male or a female avatar – it’s irrelevant.”

In fact, a great number of popular video and computer games transport the player into worlds that are primarily dominated by military action and battle. Thus, many games are situated in predominantly “male” domains. In these contexts, values and abilities traditionally linked to female self-concepts seem not to play a crucial role. Even after choosing a female character in such a game, female gamers are still confronted with tasks that require typically “male” behaviours and abilities. The choice of a female avatar has no practical consequences for game play, thus,

identification with the game character and the game's goals is not significantly enhanced.

Discussion and future directions

The aim of the present study was to gather information about active female game players' motivations to play and their experiences with games.

The results indicate that for female players the same gratifications of game playing are important than for men. The motivational dimensions of challenge, escapism and social interaction are crucial for the gaming experience of both, female male players which is in line with findings of previous studies (e.g. Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006). There are, however, some clear differences in the case of male and female players (Lucas & Sherry, 2004). First of all, the respondents in the present interview study clearly indicated that winning the game is not an important source of entertainment for them. As men show a higher interest in competitive situations than females (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006), future research should further probe on sex based differences in the motivation to win and on the influence of experiences of success and failure during game play.

Further important differences concerning the situation of male and female game players were illustrated in this study. While most male players have little difficulties to find same-sex friends that share their interest in video or computer games, female players are confronted with the opposite situation. As was expressed by most of our interviewees, female game players often have to cope with a lack of interest and support from their female friends who have little respect for their hobby. Thus, female game players are confronted with a lack of social support from their peer environment.

Furthermore, the content of contemporary games seems to put female players into a difficult position. On the one hand, the majority of our respondents indicated that they prefer female avatars. On the other hand, many recent video games are situated in a narrative context (e.g. battle or war) that requires primarily masculine avatar features. Consequently, even when choosing to play an avatar who's biological sex is female, female player are still confronted with avatars that personalize primarily masculine attributes. Little is know about the choice of avatar features and the consequences for identification with the avatar yet. A recent research project of the authors of the present study addresses this issue with a quasi experimental research design (Trepte, Reinecke, & Behr, in preparation).

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