Video Games and Gender Studies

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Why the study of video games and gender?

Let us start from the issue of gender. A methodologically effective way to produce a definition of gender is to look at it in relation to the notion of sex. In the sex/gender dichotomy that informs a substantive portion of gender studies, sex defines the physical and biological characteristics of an individual, while gender refers both to the inner predisposition and the socially constructed identities of individuals. In this perspective, sex is the biological lens through which to read sexed bodies— what one is physically 'born with'. On the other hand, gender is a social role—what one does with sex in society. Therefore, a person can be born in a certain body with a certain predisposition, and the combination of many different aspects will make their sex and gender assignments in society a complex or complicated affair.

An important point to keep in mind is that the sex and gender distinction is not 'natural' or universal—it is a way to approach a seminal and multidimensional aspect of human existence that takes different forms in different cultures and societies. Ultimately, biological sex is, itself, a cultural construct. Nature provides a lot of different bodies, while we create categories to read them. I would like to approach this issue to get to the point of video games by discussing one key concept in gender studies: heteronormativity. Moreover, I would like to relate the treatment of this concept from the field of gender studies in the humanities to recent discourses and research in the field of positivist science.

Heteronormativity could be defined as the underlying logical structure of kinship in a society. As an ideology, heteronormativity works under the assumption that there exist two mutually interdependent sex *and* gender assignments as a natural, biological given, hence erasing all that does not qualify in the strict binary. The definition allows us to approach both the issue of how individuals are socially engendered in social context, and how what has been defined as *the straight mind* produces a totalizing view of history, social reality, culture, language, and biology. In a heteronormative horizon, whoever falls out of this this ideology—most often a patriarchal one– is a deviant subject.

What does science say about sexed bodies? For decades, we have been taught that XX female and XY male genes indicate binary sexes and gendered individuals. In fact, a new science of gender is emerging. Geneticists suggest that nature is more complex. XX and XY are just a shorthand definition: they are unsatisfactory as a scientific construct. We have situations in which females are XY and males are XX. Others in which a pregnant mother carries male chromosomes, or a male discovers he has a uterus. Biologically, geneticists suggest that no less than 1 person in 100 has a hard biological difference in sex development compared to the strict male/female binary.

These figures correspond to a lot of people, and they do not consider the issue of the gendered inclinations of individuals: what they feel and discover about themselves, provided they have a chance to express it freely, further complicates and expands this scenario of difference. What these figures mean is that the male/female matrix is lazy science, even though its majoritarian dominance exerts a normative effect on society. Hence the importance of looking at both gender and sex as ultimately *cultural* constructs——to challenge views that have been used, historically, to pathologise individuals who did not fall into the heterosexual matrix, and were therefore labelled as physically or psychologically deviant or abnormal.

The traditions of feminist, queer, and transgender studies have been challenging heteronormative ideas for decades, and the LGBTQI communities and their allies have likewise been supporting more diverse, inclusive, and tolerant views of society. The issue of gender diversity is, therefore, an unescapably political point. With this intervention, I want to underline that it is also a scientifically important issue. Let us not get fooled with pseudo-scientific arguments on how nature purportedly makes us up with just two standard cookie cutters. This is bad, lazy science. This is a crucial point, because gender studies are not about political correctness. Likewise, this conference is not about helping the 'others'. And it is not about creating a ghetto where minorities can be displayed and showcased. Rather, this initiative is about contributing to a larger mission that aims to make diversity something that is not abnormal. This is a political battle, but it is also what factual science suggests.

So, why video games and gender? Because games have been a part of the everyday lives of millions of individuals for the past few decades. And because for many years, games have been made mostly through a male, white, heterosexual gaze. So, we have seen the endless display of damsels in distress, deviant homosexuals, objectified transsexuals, and black foes as some of the mainstays of ordinary and dominant representations of video games. That does not mean we have not seen more inclusive and diverse representations, too. Once exceptions to the rule of audience expectations maintained by producers and game-makers, more inclusive views of sexuality and genders are emerging in the medium of the video game. The emergence of a diversity-positive, progressive area of game development that looks at the full spectrum of the colours of our experience of sexuality can be welcomed as a potentially transformative scenario for the whole of the medium, its audiences, and society at large.

Games are neither good nor bad. They are cultural constructs. As such, we would like to examine them today: looking at both issues and problems, and at their potential to tell different stories, from the perspective of gender studies, game and media theory, and design, among the others. I am delighted to give word to our speakers from a broad range of perspectives on these themes of utmost importance for the future of the medium and a more inclusive society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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