Is There a Need for Games with Gendered Narrative?

Sophia Pretoria George
University of Abertay Dundee
Kydd Building, Bell Street
Dundee, Scotland

SophiaGeorge1@aol.com

ABSTRACT

According to survey results, women only make up six per cent of the UK games industry workforce. As a result, are some consumers receiving games narrative from a male gendered perspective and could this be problematic for a female audience? This paper explores the idea of a gendered narrative in digital games and sees whether or not it could lead women to engaging more with games.

By looking at feminist theory in regards to films and literature, as well as existing games, this paper explores how games could possibly appeal more towards women via gendered narrative. Feminist theories, such as the male gaze, a term conceived by Laura Mulvey, are evident in many digital games – particularly mainstream and "AAA" titles. This essay also analyses trends and movements in the games industry, such as the "Girls Game Movement" and Japan's "Women's Games" along with the research surrounding them, to see if attempts at gendered narrative have proved successful. Certain games such as "Rockett's New School" and "Angelique" are looked at as case studies.

Some of the research carried out shows that some women tend to favour narrative elements, such as character development, in-game relationship developments and immersive storylines. Women are more engaged with games that have activities that include collecting, creating, construction and other positive narrative experiences. In addition, game studios that have a large percentage of women developers tend to enjoy more success in capturing a female audience. The results suggest that games that have gendered narrative can not only familiarize women with technology, in turn making the games industry more diverse, but may also lead to the expansion of female culture into games.

General Terms
Theory

Keywords
Gender, Narrative

1. INTRODUCTION

Although games are increasing becoming a large part of culture, it seems that girls and young women show much less interest in digital games, play less and for shorter timeframes than men. (Brown, Hall, Holtzer, Brown, & Brown, 1997; Hartman & Klimmt, 2006) Despite this, according to The ESA, 'Forty-two percent of all game players are women. In fact, women over the age of 18 represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (37 percent) than boys age 17 or younger (13 percent).' Therefore, the games industry is in a position where female players are present, but they do not appear to be engaged with games to the same extent as males. By looking at existing games and gender studies, this paper aims to explore whether or not gendered narrative is necessary for today's digital games.

2. GENDERED NARRATIVE IN MEDIA AND ART

John Berger discusses the idea of a gendered narrative in his 1972 book and television series "Ways of Seeing," which acts as a criticism towards western cultural aesthetics. By looking through art history, Berger states that many classical pieces of art paint women as objects of desire, rather than their own person. In today's society, Berger claims that these attitudes are still being expressed today – but through media such as film, television and advertising.

Berger states that a woman's self is split into two; the surveyor and the surveyed. "Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how women appear to a man can determine how she can be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it." It seems that the 'ideal' viewer is a male, and that images of women are there to flatter him. (Berger, 1972)

Laura Mulvey has made similar assumptions about how society views women. In her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' she talks about the 'Male Gaze.' In the text, published in 1975, Mulvey addresses how most cinema was made with the assumption that heterosexual males would be the default audience for films. Due to this assumption, many women in cinema were objects, rather than possessors of gaze. She says that 'Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks in either side of the screen.' Molly Haskell also voices this concern with women in films. In her book "Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies," Haskell analyses the appearance, perception and treatment of women in old films. She explains "The anomaly that women are the majority if the human race, half of its brains, half of its procreative power, most of its nurturing power, and yet are its servants and romantic slaves was brought home with peculiar force in the Hollywood film."(1974) Haskell believed that women's roles in films were serving to men.

These theories can directly relate to games. Some games are guilty of shooting scenes from a certain angle that sexualises a female character. Figure one shows a screenshot from Mass Effect 2. In the scene, the characters Shepard and Miranda are discussing Miranda's sister. The camera angle is positioned at a low level, parallel to Miranda's back side. The way in which this shot has been framed adds nothing to the character's dialogue, so it is therefore assumed that this framing has been constructed for

Figure 1. An in-game image from Bioware's Mass Effect 2, showing Shepard and Miranda talking.

visual pleasure. This situation is particularly questionable, considering that the player can choose their protagonist to be male or female.

To sum up, theorists suggest that women are always seen through a male perspective in media, regardless of the individual's own gender. By looking at the European Oil Paintings, Berger discovered that the vast majority of nude paintings were self-serving to men and that these features have carried through to today's society. Looking at popular games like Mass Effect 2 has revealed that a straight-male audience can also be assumed in digital games as well.

3. CONFLICT, POSITIVE STORIES AND EMERGENT NARRATIVE

Conflict is very important aspect of any narrative. Syd Feild's "Three act structure" is a screenplay breakdown, sometimes used to evaluate modern stories. The first act focuses on setting up the story, such as its characters, environment and back story. The second act is primarily focused on conflict, such as the protagonist over coming problems and meeting enemies. The third act is the story resolution. (2005) Conflict is central to any narrative, but also to gameplay as well. "Rules of Play" defines a game as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that result in a quantifiable outcome," and states that "Conflict is central to games." (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004)

However, the element of conflict in digital games has often been criticised. Chris Crawford has spoken in depth about how violence in games in his book "Chris Crawford on game design." Crawford states that 'women don't play out their conflicts in the same dimensions that men do. Where men rely heavily on physical forms of conflict, women tend towards social conflict.' (2003, pp.56) In addition, Crawford expresses his disappointment with the game industry's reliance on violence as a form on conflict, calling it overdone and distasteful. The challenge for game designers is how to effectively create conflict without violence.

This issue with conflict that Crawford mentions is problematic in regards to involving women in games. According to studies, most women do not like violence in media. Hartman and Klimmt state that 'Research on media genre preference has demonstrated that males are more interested in violent entertainment than females are (e.g., Slater, 2003). Females tend to display a very low preference for observing or participating in conflicts and their resolutions through violence (see Bussey & Bandura, 1999) and find non-violent entertainment, such as comedy or sad films, more attractive.' (2006) Hartman and Klimmt also says that 'Television research has revealed that females value programs with considerable amounts of meaningful dialogue and character interaction, and are less attracted by action oriented formats with taciturn people who ignore each other (e.g., Mayer, 2003). Most single-player computer games, however, seem to adopt structures of action oriented entertainment formats such as action movies or sports broadcasts, and only include social interaction to a limited extent,' (2006). This research shows that there are in fact differences in preferences in regards to narrative.

Conflict is an important aspect of both narrative and gameplay. The games industry is seemingly facing a problem were many of its narrative is described as too violent. However, it is of course possible to have conflict in game narrative, without the use of violence. Even in the Sims, a non violent game, popular with women, conflict is prevalent. Jenkins explains

"Characters are given desires, urges, and needs , which can come into conflict with each other, and thus produce dramatically compelling encounters. Characters respond emotionally to events in their environment, as when characters mourn the loss of a loved one. Our choices have consequence as, when we spend all of our money and have nothing left to buy them food" (2004, pp 128)

Therefore, the players of the Sims seem to face many different types of conflict during play, including social conflict with the other characters.

Henry Jenkins cites The Sims as a prime example of an emergent narrative. He states that 'Most players come away from spending time with The Sims with some degree of narrative satisfaction. Wright has created a world ripe with narrative possibilities, where each design decision has been made with an eye towards increasing the prospects of interpersonal romance or conflict.' (2004, pp.128) The emergent narrative of The Sims, combined with narrative themes of relationships fits well with the findings of gender preferences in games outlined by Hartman and Klimmt, who revealed that women want to see more social interaction in games. (2006)

4. EXSISTING GENDERED NARRATIVE IN DIGITAL GAMES

Throughout the history of digital games, there have been several attempts at having gender-specific games or games made and marketing primarily just towards women. After the success of "Barbie Fashion Designer" for PC, the games industry felt encouraged to think about expanding their market. 'The Girls Game Movement' or 'Pink Games' is known as the attempt to make games for girls in the 1990s. This move was not only to expand the games market, but to also introduce girls to games, so that they may take an interest in computers, engineering and technology.

Brenda Laurel founded 'Purple Moon' to make games for girls and spent two years researching how to make games that girls would like. This research included interviews with girls, their parents and teachers, focus groups, primatology, cognitive psychology, gender studies, spatial recognition, sociology and play theory. (Laurel, 1998) The research carried out to make these

games was documented in “From Barbie to Mortal Kombat,” the research suggested that girl’s prefer gameplay activities such as creating, collecting and constructing, and preferred emphasis on story, characters and relationships, rather than goal-based gameplay. Much like the study by Hartman and Klimmt, this research proved to developers at the time, that girls want different gaming experiences to boys.

Many critics questioned the need for such games, as they saw it as limiting and cutting a potential market in half. Games designer Ernest Adams wrote in 1998;

‘If the number of games for girls is a tiny fraction of the total, it tells the girls that they are second class cybercitizens, who have to make do with what they are given…why make ‘games for girls?’ why not just make good games for everybody?’ He then says ‘ Marketing software "for" a particular group to the exclusion of another is just wrongthink. We wouldn't put "Software for Whites" on our boxes, or "Software for Jews." Why put "Software for Girls"? Software is software; the shape of your genitals doesn't affect the way it runs, unless you're doing something God didn't intend with your CD-ROM drive’ (Adams, 1998)

Much of this criticism is reasonable; gender stereotyping is a common problem. Also, The notion of a product for women has had a controversial history. Haskell said about Women’s Films, “What more damning comment on the relations between men and women in America then the very notion of something called the “woman’s film?”” The Women’s Film is a genre of films for women, created mostly by men for women, and focused on assumed women’s problems, such as romance and family life. Haskell though that this genre suggests that women and their emotions are of “minor significance” (1987, pp.154)

However, going by Berger and Mulvey's theories, if most art and media is created for men by default, perhaps it was necessary to see if any gender preferences exist in games? Most criticisms towards gender-specific games often cite these ‘Pink Games,’ such as the Barbie and Purple Moon software as examples of games exclusive for girls. However, studying Japan's approach to gender-specific games can offer a wider understanding of what games for girls could achieve.

“Angelique” (1994) by Ruby Party is a very important in regards to gender-specific games. It is the first of its kind and set many features current in many of Japan’s Women’s Games. The gameplay is a mixture of a story driven conversations and a city-building simulation. The narrative in Angelique was inspired by “Shojou Manga” (Japanese comic books for girls). By basing the game on conventions of a pre-existing and very popular medium, the developers successfully familiarised girls and women with digital games. The game was very successful, which prompted sequels, comics, animations and merchandise. Since then, Ruby Party has created many successful games for women and girls, and has prompted other companies, such as Konami, to do the same.

Comparing the Girls Game Movement with Japan’s Women’s Games gives interesting results. Firstly, it is important to note that, unlike the Girl Game Movement, Japan’s Women’s Games were not motivated by political and educational motives. Instead, they simply wanted to experiment with their development teams to try and explore an untapped market. The narrative themes of some of the Purple Moon games, such as Rockett’s new school, were a result of years of research and testing. In the Ruby Party games, however, the narrative was always based on popular media of the time, such as girl’s comics, TV shows and dramas. Women’s games in Japan are still an ever-growing niche, whereas the ‘Pink Games’ of the Girls Games Movement had a rapid decrease in popularity after a few years, and then ceased to exist.

Even though a lot more research went into the Girls Game Movement, Japan’s Women’s Games were a lot more successful. There could be several reasons for this. For example, the Ruby Party games were developed exclusively by women, whereas 80% of Purple Moon’s staff consisted of women (although this is still very high for today’s standards). Also, the Girls Game Movement drew a lot of criticism for reinforcing stereotypes and behaviours that could keep girls out of computing and engineering. (Gurak, 2001)This may have been due to the narrative emphasis on friendship, popularity, clothes and boys. This was perhaps not an issue in later Ruby Party games, such as Harukanaru Tokino Nakade3, which deals with not so stereotypical themes such as battle, death and time-travelling. In Haruka3, the heroine seems to have some traditional masculine traits, such as carrying a sword, wearing jinbaori (clothes worn by samurai in battle) and trainers (rather than more feminine shoes) and often having aggressive facial expressions. These traits are balanced by more feminine qualities, such as long hair and flowery clothes. This character design seems to be an important narrative choice in portraying the character as strong and wilful, but also cheerful and approachable. Therefore, perhaps having narrative elements that are not overly stereotyped would work better in the games market.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated whether or not a gendered narrative is necessary in games development. By looking at games from the past, as well as gender studies from acclaimed theorists and studies on media, it is established that most women tend to prefer different narrative elements than men. This paper has shown that games that are made exclusively for women have received criticism, but have also been successful in capturing an audience.

Berger, Haskell and Mulvey have spoken out about the “Male Gaze;” how art and media have assumed a male audience both in the past and present. This idea is evident in games like Mass Effect 2 that show preference to their male audience by showing female characters in a sexual light, without any sexual context.

Also, it seems that past games that have incorporated a gendered narrative have had mixed reactions. The Girls Game Movement, taking place in the late 1990s, saw slight success before eventually collapsing. Much of the criticism towards these games consisted of accusations of gender stereotyping, despite the games being based on research. In addition, many critics did not see the point in making games specifically for girls. As a counter argument to this, Japan’s Women’s Games were also researched. These games had no feminist agenda, yet are still successful today in Japan, and have a very devoted fan base. Despite this, successful games like The Sims and Myst have had a large percentage of female players – yet they were not made and marketed for women exclusively. (Ray, 2004)

Further research might investigate the how a team of female developers could make more appealing games for women, or whether female authors/directors would make more engaging books/films and other media for women.

6. REFERENCES

[1] Adams, E. 1998 Games for Girls? Eeeeewww! [Online] Available from: http://www.designersnotebook.com/Columns/004_Games_for_Girls/004_games_for_girls.htm [Accessed: 2nd March 2012] [1] BBC, 1972. Ways of Seeing. [video online] Available at:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u72AIab-Gdc&feature=relmfu> [Accessed April 19th 2012].

[2] Berger, J. 1972. Ways of Seeing. England. Penguin.

[3] Brown, R. M., Hall, L. R., Holtzer, R., Brown, S. L., & Brown, N. L., 1997. Gender and video game performance. Sex Roles. [e-journal] Volume 3 Available through: Springerlink [Accessed 7th May 2012]

[4] Cassel, J, & Jenkins, H., 1998. From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games. Massachusetts, USA. MIT Press.

[5] Crawford, C., 2005. Chris Crawford on Game Design. Indiana, USA. Newriders.

[6] Feild, S., 2005. Screensplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting. USA. Delta.

[7] Gauntlett, D., 2002. Media, Gender and Identity: An introduction. New York, USA. Routledge.

[8] Graner Ray, S., 2004. Gender Inclusive Games Design: Expanding the Market. Advances in Computer Graphics and Game Development. Massachusetts, USA. Charles River Media.

[9] Gurak, L,J., 2001. Cyberliteracy: navigating the Internet with awareness. Indiana, USA. Yale University Press.

[10] Haskell, M., 1987. From Reverence to Rape.USA. University of Chicago Press.

[11] Kim, H., 2009. Women's Games in Japan: Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction. Theory, Culture and Society.[e-journal] 26 (2-3) Available through: SAGE Journals Online [Accessed 10th January 2012]

[12] Laurel, B., 2001. Utopian Entrepreneur . Massachusetts, USA. The MIT Press.

[13] Mulvey, L., 1975. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.[pdf] Available From: http://imlportfolio.usc.edu/ctcs505/mulveyVisualPleasureNarrativeCinema.pdf [Accessed 5th March 2012]

[14] Salen, K. Zimmerman, E., 2003. Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals. Massachusetts, USA. The MIT Press.

[15] Schmidt, K. Cohn, J., 2001. Human Facial Expressions as Adaptations: Evolutionary Questions in Facial Expression Research [pdf] Available from: http://www.pitt.edu/~kschmidt/schmidtcoh [Accessed 20th March 2012]

[16] TED, 1998. Brenda Laurel on games for girls [video online] Available at: http://www.ted.com/talks/brenda_laurel_on_making_games_for_girls.html [Accessed 20th March 2012]

[17] The Entertainment Software Association, 2011. 2011 Games and Family Life. [Online] Available from: http://www.theesa.com/games-improving-what-matters/families.asp [Accessed: 2nd March 2012]

[18] The Entertainment Software Association, 2011. Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry. [pdf] May 2011. Available from: http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2011.pdf [Accessed: 10th January 2012]

[19] Jenkins, H., 2004. Game Design as Narrative Architecture. In: Wardrip-Fruin, N. and Harrigan P. eds. (2004) First Person: New Media As Story, Performance, and Game. Massachusetts, USA. The MIT Press.

[20] Williams, D. Martins, N. Consalvo, M and Ivory, J.D, 2009. The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games. New Media Society.[e-journal] Jul 21, 2009 Available from: http://nms.sagepub.com/content/11/5/815.full.pdf+html [Accessed 2nd March 2012]