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Video games' potential for social change.

A qualitative analysis of the evolution of gender and age as institutions through video games

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September 2018

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The aim of this research is to analyze and document *change in gender and age as social institutions* by looking at the evolution of gender and age representations in the interactive medium of *video games*. I complement a qualitative discourse analysis of video game content with analysis of online content, video game comments and reactions, especially regarding games that are widely accepted as making an important step towards social inclusion. My research starts from documenting the phenomenon of social change in *art indie games*, a type of games associated with innovation and social inclusion. I then go on to explore several relevant mainstream games.

I analyze indie art games as a medium with specific affordances for social change and promotion of gender and age diversity, redefining gender and age as social institutions. I continue with a series of case studies in which I delineate different types of gender and age inclusion, starting from the *powerful female characters* phenomenon – a relatively recent development in video games to include powerful female protagonists or secondary characters, in the line of Lara Croft. Therefore, mainstream games are analyzed with the aim of identifying *types of game-based (elderly) female power*, created at the intersection of *game content* and *players' and other people's reactions to novel ways of empowering women*.

By analyzing video game content and the online reactions it provoked, I highlight *discursive dynamics of social change* and try to explain them in the context of *an evolving gamer identity*. One conclusion to this study is that video games offer specifically interactive *media* that are part of active communities which, in conjunction with video game *content* and gamers' *involvement*, create spaces for controversy and social change. This change is especially visible regarding gender, while age diversity and inclusion as a topic remains secondary and rather invisible. However, video games and the debates that they provoke also depend, in turn, on gender and age ideologies, which they may alter but also reproduce, depending on the medium's affordances and the way their creators define their main audiences and anticipate their reactions to change.

The importance of this research comes from studying gender and age following a theoretical approach based in two fields: *sociology and game studies*. I approach the analysis of changes in gender and age as institutions from the perspective of Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, linking the concept of *recursive social practices* with a concept specific to game studies, namely *games' procedural rhetoric*. Thus, I analyze *how games, through their procedural rhetoric and other game elements that are similar to other media (stories, characters, graphic design), contribute to the change and reproduction of gender and age norms*. Moreover, I analyze these changes in the social context of these games, in order to point out how creators, players and other people interpret these changes, and how gaming communities and their discourses change in this regard too.

My methodological approach aims to grasp in-depth gender and age construction. I use critical discourse analysis to analyze gender and age in a relational way. I look at *(elderly) female characters' construction* through relationships with characters of different ages and genders, their role in the story, and elements of procedural rhetoric. Here, by elements of procedural rhetoric I mean to display *how through games' possibilities offered for players' actions* (such as, "you can fly" or "you can buy new lives") *and constraints* (such as, "you die after three mistakes" or "you can't attack your allies") *implicitly and interactively formulate a message about these characters, through the process of gameplay*. The qualitative discourse analysis of video games, following Fairclough's (1996) approach, is complemented by the analysis of *paratext* – that is online content, video game comments and reactions - especially regarding games that are widely accepted as making an important step towards social inclusion.

The most important conclusions to this study are that there *are visible changes, as well as stability and resistance, in the construction of gender and age in video games*. People in video game communities react to games' innovations (or lack thereof) in gender and age portrayal, and their reactions incentivize video game companies to further modify their content. Another conclusion is that, while gender inclusion has been widely debated and a heated subject in these communities, *age is still invisible*, with characters remaining young as a rules, especially the playable characters. Some games do introduce powerful and elderly characters that use age

and gender in novel gameplay interactions. Although, through their artistic and critical framing and claims, indie art games are usually expected to be more oriented towards social inclusion, in effect they seem not to have a focus on gender or age inclusion. I find that *indie art games use stereotypical gender and age representations as rhetorical resources to make a point about other aspects of life*, like death or mental illness. However, I also find that *mainstream games display significant change in gender portrayal, through a persistent preoccupation for this topic in recent years*. My analysis identifies and outlines different stages in the change of gender and age in video games, especially in mainstream games, constructing a *typology of emerging forms of game-based feminine power*:

- Female characters that are powerful through their abilities, such as combat or exploration, while being created for a projected heterosexual male audience, as they are heavily sexualized (in the Lara Croft line);
- Competent female characters who are deprived of agency in order to send a message about the gender glass ceiling and double standard;
- Powerful female characters whose power is rhetorically constructed as surprising or humorous;
- Powerful female characters whose power is normalized, met with no surprise, inhabiting gameworlds in which one expects to encounter a variety of gendered types, including strong female warriors and docile men who are afraid of war and prefer manufacturing garments.

Another conclusion of my study is that, although video games are largely dependent upon mainstream gender and age ideologies, they create an inviting space for ideological debate and conflict. In this space we observe how collaborative practices of players' interpreting games gradually started to rely on novel discourses regarding gender and age. It remains a topic for further research to inquire into how these forms of change, persistence and resistance in video game communities and media reflect, augment and modify gender and age in other social settings, with repercussions for a wider social organization.

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