

Designing Gender: Modding in Minecraft

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Abstract: Technical knowledge and skill with digital technologies are essential to today's global workplace. One way in which learners can acquire these skills is through participation in affinity spaces for video games. By using and creating content in these spaces, learners have motivation to practice skills such as programming and digital art creation. In these spaces they can also gain experience learning from and teaching others, also vital skills for an information economy. However, as women tend to not participate in the affinity spaces for as many games, it is possible that they are missing out on valuable learning opportunities. The popular game *Minecraft* may prove an exception, because the game has many female fans. What follows is an investigation of how whether or not women are creating content for the game, and whether or not their creations are welcomed in the fan community.

Introduction

For many popular video games, players create modifications ('mods') to use and share with other players. Creating modifications for a game relies on a wide variety of skills related to digital content creation. For example, players use graphics software to create new art to be used in game: anything from using image editing software such as Photoshop to recolor existing objects and characters to creating entirely new art. Players use 3D graphics software to create new objects, and practice programming by creating gameplay modifications, which change the behavior and rules of part or all of the game.

These skills take time and practice to learn. However, to many players of video games, the motivation of modifying a favorite game makes them worth learning. Fans who enjoy modding practice these fundamental technological and design skills and in the process become more technologically literate. If women and girls are not using video games in the same ways as men, they are missing out on the opportunity to acquire and practice these crucial skills. As such, we will be looking at a specific gaming community to see if females are participating in modding practices in that community. We have chosen the popular Swedish game *Minecraft*. *Minecraft* is a game that encourages users to create their own content in a virtual domain.

This paper investigates the modding practices of female *Minecraft* players in order to build understandings about: a) how women begin to develop design skills through game play; and b) how players discursively frame gender in game-based affinity spaces. In this case study we describe how a female modder developed technical skills partly through collaboration with the *Minecraft* modding community, even as she faced unexpected controversy about portrayals of gender in her creation.

Framework

Games are more than isolated and individualized experiences in a virtual world; they are frequently the locus of intense collaboration and social learning as players explore their shared interests. James Paul Gee calls these sites of joint activity "affinity spaces" (2007), a group of people that participate in a semiotic domain—"an area or set of activities where people think, act, and value in certain ways" (p. 19). This is an important idea in video game studies, because it looks not just at the games themselves but at how people play them and the social spaces around them. As Gee and Hayes (2010) explain, it is essential to not ignore these aspects of games but rather "to see gaming communities, modding, and other practices associated with games as all part of gaming today". (P.7) Modding is a design practice, and designing is a form of meaning making. Design practices represent a literary practice that learners need to be able to engage in order to understand systems and complex problems, increasingly important in order to meet the demands of today's workplace (Games 2008).

Game play is not just a leisure activity; its also a semiotic enterprise and cognitive endeavor with important implications for gender. Game play often entails both meaning-making relative to the games *procedural rhetoric* and the development of mastery in computational practice. In the first case, Bogost (2007) argues that "Video games are usually created with some expressive purpose in mind; they represent models of systems or spaces that players can inhabit" (p.122). Video games, whether overtly or not, have messages like any other medium. Players can negotiate the game's designed rhetoric by rewriting the game with mods.

Games and game communities are also arenas where players develop computational literacies and technical practices. Brunner's (2008) study on a content creation site for girls, KaHooTZ, concluded that "games serve as

an entry point to the culture of computing and information technology” (p. 41). Scholars of gender, media and education point out that games inspire young women’s interest in informational technology.

Androcentric social norms can present barriers to women’s access to and participation in gaming. A major obstacle to engagement with games for girls and women is that they might feel that games are ‘for boys’ and so it is not something they should be doing. As Taylor (2008) explains, “Many women have been given signals (from the broader culture and from the industry itself) that computer games are not meant for them” (p. 62). Women are often led to doubt whether being a female player of video games is in fact an ‘allowable’ and socially legitimized activity to begin with.

Scholarship has shown that women generally have differential access to games, whether from a lack of physical access or from perceived social barriers. Taylor (2008) elaborates that “It is too often assumed that women who do not buy computer games or choose particular titles are making an informed decision—that is, a negative decision about a game or a play mechanic— rather than one in which they simply have not had the access to experiment and formulate tastes and preferences...” (p. 62). Part of this investigation asks whether women feel welcomed in the Minecraft community. We look at whether and how women are participating in the modding community of *Minecraft* and examine how the broader Minecraft community responds to women’s engagement with modding practice.

Minecraft: An Overview

Minecraft is a game about exploration, creativity, and design. The defining feature of the game is that its world is comprised entirely of cubes, which are made out of different materials. They are arranged in a variety of ways and make up every part of the game’s environment. These cubes can be removed and placed at will by the player, and thus the world of the game is completely reconfigurable.

The topic of gender in Minecraft is of particular interest because it is intended to be a genderless world. The player’s avatar is a blocky looking character that is meant to be a genderless human, as Minecraft creator Notch explains: “The human model is intended to represent a Human Being. Not a male Human Being or a female Human Being, but simply a Human Being” (“Gender in Minecraft”, 2012). However, many players would like to see the option of gender in the world, feeling that the default character definitely appears to be male. As such, they create mods to introduce gender into the game.

The Minecraft community consists of many different spaces such as websites, forums, and even physical meeting places such as the yearly MineCon convention. As Lammers (2012) notes, affinity spaces take place not in a singular space or site, but rather “fan spaces can consist of numerous interconnected web-sites, discussion boards, and listervs” (p. 25). However, in the case of Minecraft, the official forums run by the game’s developers is the largest single space for discussion of the game. More importantly for this examination, the vast majority of players mods are posted onto these official forums. As such, all research will take place on this site.

Method

The research here will be presented as a case study of one particular mod and the nexus of online social interactions that surrounds its creation on official Minecraft forums. The data presented in this paper grows out of purposive sampling methods as a means of exploring new areas of investigation and generation new research questions (Wodak, 2001). Like other forms of qualitative inquiry in which external validity is established socially, through the accumulation and assessment of the collective body of research, this paper does not purport to demonstrate the external validity of its sample through its methods. Rather, it adopts and utilizes a purposive, convenience sample (Stake, 1995) as a means of iteratively developing constructs of inquiry relative to gender, modding and literacy practices.

Discourse Analysis and Purposive Sampling

We have proceeded iteratively in our purposive sampling and examination of data (see Gee, 2005). First we surveyed the larger data corpus of modding discussion on Minecraft forums to identify several key elements of discussion. Second, we began to focus in more detail on interactional discussions, selecting samples of data that highlighted the following questions: (1) How do players discuss and debate the use of mods to change the portrayal of gender in the game? (2) How do players ask for and provide help to the mod’s creator and other users? (3) How do players talk address the real-life gender of players and users? Third, using Gee’s (2005) Discourse analysis, we focused in depth on pieces of data that provided generative answers to these questions.

This paper investigates the way in which the social semiotic artifacts of Minecraft a) game modifications and b)

game paratexts (discussion forums and wikis) are mobilized in design practice relative to discursive forms of gender. Put more simply, this paper looks at the way in which the social meanings of gender are negotiated, re-produced and/or contested as players use Minecraft as a site of design and creative practice. Discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) fits well with this mode of investigation, as it looks at the way both linguistic and non-linguistic elements are combined to build social meanings, enact identities, share beliefs and express affiliation.

GenderSelectionMod

The mod we are looking at here is the GenderSelectionMod (the name of this mod has been assigned a pseudonym by us to preserve anonymity). This mod, created by a female fan, allows players to select a female character. This new character has a feminine shape and a female voice.

The mod is a much-discussed; the forum thread on which the mod is posted currently has 1606 replies, which is quite a few more than the majority of mod posts receive save for the most persistently popular. As of January 2013, this thread has existed for over a year and a half. The high reply count is in large part due to two distinct types of posts. The first are posts that debate the merits of the mod, and how players view the role of gender in Minecraft. The second type of post are ones that relate to learning or teaching, mainly centered around users giving or receiving technical help.

In-game, the mod is fairly straightforward. Upon installation of this mod, the player is granted access to a new character shape, the female character. This female character looks much like the original character, having the same blocky look. She is slightly smaller, and exclaims in a female voice when she takes damage, and has a small rectangle on her chest for breasts. The blockiness and angularity of the character fits in with the look of the rest of the game.

The mod's creator explains that her visual design grew out of both aesthetic choices and technical limitations. She believes that this character is consistent with the world of the game, but also notes that her alterations were much easier than the work that would be required in order to slim down parts of the character for a more feminine shape.

Results

The creation of GenderSelectionMod was both a social and technical process, transforming Minecraft into a site of creative enterprise instead of content consumption, as games are often framed. During the process of the mod's creation, the Minecraft forums became a very active space for both design collaboration and arguments about the gendered meanings associated with Minecraft and modding.

Three major themes can be found in online talk surrounding GenderSelectionMod, which engendered a quite a bit of collaborative and contentious discussion in the Minecraft affinity space. First, GenderSelectionMod was the result of a collaborative process that the author undertook with various Minecraft forum users, answering their questions and responding to their comments. In this way it provides a real-life snapshot of the creator's development of modding expertise. Second, the practice and modding opened up a space where this player could rewrite the gendered meanings that were designed into the game by its creator. There were also a vocal group of non-modding female players who strongly supported the female mod creator, and these players used the mod themselves. Third, the mod engendered discussion of the "real-life" genders of players and forum users. The topic became an issue of content as male-presenting forum users argued the 'gendering' in the mod was improper. The men of the community could also be very supportive, even if they were not themselves using it. Any negativity or attempts to exclude the females in the thread were quickly called out by other players.

Developing Expertise Through Modding

The mod's creator interacted with users on the forum on which she posted her creation, answering their questions and responding to their comments. Most importantly, she described the development process as it happens. She initially introduced herself as a novice modder, one who did not have all of the technical skills needed to make exactly what she wanted.

The mod she created requires two different kinds of expertise. One is expertise with 3D modeling software, which is necessary to create a new mesh (3D shape) for the character. The second is programming expertise, needed both to add her character into as well as to add a graphical interface through which the user can set his or her gender.

As the mod's creator continued to work on the mod and add new features over time, she posted updates about her progress, explaining how she was able to add more features as her expertise increased. Other users provided

feedback, suggested features, reported problems, and generally let her know what they thought of her creation. The vast majority of these posts were encouraging. Other users complimented her work and encouraged her to keep adding new features. When she stated that she didn't know how to implement some features that she wanted to, more experienced modders offered up solutions to the problems that she was experiencing.

One example of this back-and-forth problem solving occurred when a user reported an error. The user that was reporting this error explained that the zombies (one of the monsters the player must fight in the game) were now female as well. This user provided a screenshot of the zombies, which now shared the player's female shape. The creator expressed her amusement and surprise and said that she would try to figure out how to fix it. At this, two other users offered solutions to her problems.

She soon after fixed the problem. It is worth noting that she was receiving enough assistance that several solutions were offered to the same problem. This is not the only time this happened throughout the thread. It is also worth noting that the users offered not just technical advice, but design help as well. During the course of the mod's creation, the mod creator implemented more advanced features as they were requested, such as the ability to use the mod in multiplayer games. Her updates became increasingly frequent. When one user reported that the gender mod is conflicting with another mod in use, the mod's creator explained that

If PlayerAPI/SmartMoving doesn't function properly when this mod gets installed second, I shall look at its code for that class and see if it would be possible to provide a simple patch, (and contact the dev. about this).

Here, her language is much more technical than it was early in the thread, and she does not apologize for the error like she does for almost all earlier ones. She offered a solution: she would try to provide a patch (an update which will fix the bug), and also stated that she would contact the developer of the mod.

When she stated that she would contact another developer to fix a problem that had been reported, she positioned herself as a more veteran player, one that engaged in technical and design speak with other modders. The confidence that she gained over time is readily apparent in her more technical language and the frequency with which she herself answered questions and problems that arise on the thread.

Rewriting Gender Portrayals

The idea of introducing gender into the game was hotly debated in the forum. As such, the reaction to the mod was mixed. On one hand, there were players who were very grateful for the option of a female character:

I appreciate what you're endeavoring to undertake here. Gender is often poorly represented in games. On the other hand, some posters don't understand the need for a female character, especially since the default character is supposedly without gender.

On the other hand some players were against the mod because they did not want gender to be an option in Minecraft. These players felt that the world is supposed to be genderless and did not understand why a female character was needed.

does it really bother you THAT much about the voice that you cannot even simply stand playing as a guy (which is only noticeable when you take damage I remind you) that you have to change it.... I find this mod unnessisary [sic] but that is my opinion... I will support the voice change, sure... but beyond that this mod is going a bit far.

The central divisive issue here seems to be whether or not players accepted the premise that Minecraft is a game without gender. Many female players argued with this premise. The following post summarized the argument that Minecraft is already gendered and that the main character is male:

Don't throw the "asexual avatar" bullcrap.
-It grunts like a man.
-it looks like a man.
-it has the complexity and the body of a man.

This was a common sentiment among both male and female players based on discussions on this forum, although many of the most impassioned posters on the subject were female.

Real life gender

There was also much discussion on the real-life gender of players who used and supported this mod. There were many expressions of concern over the mod's only audience being 'perverted' men who want to play with a female character.

Its sad cause it'll be 10% girls using this. the other 90% will be pervs [sic]

This played off the assumption that women do not play Minecraft or video games more generally. There were also a number of posts which joked about how the female should be good at cooking, weak, and other female stereotypes. However, the number of these posts was small compared to the number of posts which counter them:

If you like it, sure, download it and enjoy it too! If you don't, then be quiet and look elsewhere for a mod. Don't post if you don't have anything constructive to add to the topic (snarky remarks or comments don't count as constructive).

dont be sexist people!! really?

I mean imagine how you would feel if notch had made the avatar a girl and not a boy. A girl with girl sounds. Im sure at some point someone would want a male skin with male sounds. Girls play this game too ya know

The posters who wrote to counter sexist or offending posts were both male and female. It is clear that this discussion of sexism and lack of female players was about not just the game, but gaming communities more generally.

Discussion

The exchanges between the mod's creator and experienced players who helped her is an example of apprenticeship in the affinity space. It shows the mod's creator was able to utilize other player's expertise, and was therefore able to create something with her initially limited expertise that she would not have been able to do as easily without help from other members. In his study of the site Kongregate, Duncan (2012) studied the way that players can learn design through an affinity space, believing that "particular community provides researchers with a unique opportunity to see how gamers can be scaffolded into designers through intersection with an affinity space that features the use of shared reference materials, instructional materials, design tools..." (p. 56). The mod's creator did not have all of the technical expertise to create the mod as she wanted it, but by using the knowledge at her disposal provided by other users in the forum, she was able to slowly make her mod the way she wanted it.

Negotiating meaning

The debate over whether or not gender should be modded into the game showcases the real meaning of modding: to rewrite a game and its core mean. Many players of Minecraft, especially women, do not accept what they see as a tacitly male rhetoric of this supposedly genderless world and seek to change it.

The addition of gender to the game is therefore a modification of the game's existing world. The amount of debate around this addition further illustrates that the meaning of the game itself is being changed, and argument about whether the mod should exist shows resistance to this change. Users who are genuinely upset at the idea of adding gender to the game believe in the given meaning of the world, that is is genderless, and hence do not understand why this needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

Female players not only gain technical and creative skills from playing video games and participating in affinity spaces, but they can use these skills to contest the gendered meanings designed into the game. In this case the mod creator advances from an unsure beginner to an advanced modder dealing with artistic and technical problems. While the forum thread she created was initially filled with talk about whether or not the mod should exist, eventually discussion focused on new features and compatibilities with other mods, a result of the determination of the author and like-minded players.

Further studies such as Tran (2013) do indicate that the perceptions of female modders in this community may be more complex than they appear in this case. While this case study has limitations - the data here may not be indicative of broader trends in the frequency and reception women's modding practices - it does present compelling findings that are worthy of further investigation. This is a case of a female player without much technical background gaining knowledge and expertise motivated by her passion for Minecraft. She saw a message in the game that she did not like, and set about changing it. She felt that creating this content and sharing it was a valid option, and was met with much support and encouragement.

At the very least, the presence of female modders in Minecraft deserves further research and investigation. If women are to keep up with men in the area of technical expertise and digital know how, skills which are essential in today's information economy, it is vital that they too are able to gain these skills through participation in gaming affinity spaces.

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