

WOMEN IN GAMES CONFERENCE

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Panel Presentation: "Thinking Past Pink: Critical Considerations of Women and Gaming"

Panelists: Tina Lybæk, Mette Fairgrieve, Tore Vesterby and Emma Witkowski

Moderator: T.L Talyor

"A Tightrope Walk"

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This talk is going to be about negotiation of identity. It is about the tightrope walk between Gamer Identity and gender identity. It is the aim of this talk to visualize some of the ongoing negotiations of female gamers and thereby reveal some general "gamer-trouble". I am presenting an example of how gaming at times becomes a tightrope-walk between a desired activity and a desired identity. It is always important to remember that "the gamer" is not a gender-neutral figure. Gamer is a gendered term in itself. Which of course is why occupying a gamer-identity, as a woman, can be quite a balance.

Background:

When writing my thesis I was interested in how female gamers deal with gender and identity and what kinds of strategies they use to negotiate gamer identity. Which was why I interviewed women who *do* play computer games. My research was based on 8 longer interviews (around 1 hour each). And these female gamers ranged from, what I would call, casual gamers to very enthusiastic casual gamers.

The women in my survey all play computer games *in spite of* the ruling understandings of gender behavior. They perform an action that is not associated with feminine behavior, so to speak. Part of the aim with my investigation was to expand the term gamer: what is a gamer; who can be a gamer etc. The starting point was that women don't play differently, but they do have different conditions as gamers.

Their strategies ranged from acceptance of the ruling guidelines for gendered behavior, to ambivalence, and to a total rejection of the norm, saying, "I don't care". I'm going to highlight the strategy, that I named: "*I'm a gamer, but only in front of my computer*", which can be said to be a rather ambivalent strategy. I used a social constructivist method, that is, I regard the ways we understand gender and sex as socially constructed, not as results of biology. The premise or ground, for understanding the points I make, is to understand that: *We constantly perform gender in an ongoing process*. Nationality can be used as an example; we internalize the concept of a nationality, as something that defines us, and in the same way do we internalize gender. *Gender becomes a sign on our bodies that defines our actions*. And it also defines the limits for our actions.

Negotiation of identity:

Though one of my most important findings when writing my thesis was that there *is* no archetypical female gamer, I have chosen to present one example/case, as she illustrates many of the various ways one female gamer negotiates her gamer identity.

I am going to call her by her "nick" she uses when she plays Half Life on-line: MajorM. She both negotiates traditionally and untraditionally, as we shall see.

I present three examples on the significance of context, of how it matters where you are, and who you're with, when negotiating gamer identity. (These are all out-of-game observations.)

The first example given is the contextually dependent negotiations taking place where MajorM studies. MajorM attends the School of Design in Copenhagen, a context that cherishes all that's "alternative" and untraditional, a place where she feels secure telling about her gaming activities, where she is visible. Visibility is important for her in this context, she becomes culturally recognizable as a cool design student by playing computer games. Playing computer games is part of a many-sided identity in a context where she is known.

Another example is the game shop, where she shops for games with her boyfriend. She chooses to play the part of the girl friend who is just tagging along. She says: *"I think about saying out loud: hey let's buy this game, but then again, I don't have to prove anything to the others, as long as I know myself that I'm a gamer it's enough."*

The negotiations are uphill: she's fighting against the discourse of who the gamer is, and she struggles with her invisibility. She tells me that she shares her gaming knowledge with those she feels will understand, those "in the know", for instance she brags about finishing a game to *other gamers*.

A third example is an incident at a party, where she is "outed" as a gamer, other people have already heard of her gaming activities before she gets the chance to tell herself. She says that *"I feel like an animal in the Zoo, I'm represented as something weird, where I'm like, yea yea, I do that too..."* She's uneasy with a gamer identity being the only thing defining her. She becomes super-visible, and the gamer becomes the very headline of her identity.

Presentation of self (in-game):

I'll move on to how MajorM presents herself within the game. MajorM mainly plays Half Life on-line. She uses a highly sexualized avatar, the "leather-broad", as she calls her. She always uses female avatars as well as the same figure and nick. She tried, what she describes as a more militant avatar, but as she says: *"after all I found it more exiting to be a latex-girl."* Even though she defines herself as a casual gamer, she is an elitist regarding Half Life. She has to be number one on the server she plays on. Within the game she has the competence *and* the virtual looks, which is a particular cultural ideal that she embraces.

Her avatar-name, MajorM, is gender neutral and even though it's an ironic name it fits the context and matches her ambitions. The name too can be confusing in combination with the hyper sexualized avatar, and she is often taken for a man. (Because she doesn't use the microphone or talk in the game, furthermore many men play female avatars and finally it's mostly men who play

First Person Shooters.) This annoys her as she wants credit for her actions as a woman, and wants to be recognized as her gender.

She becomes almost like a double-drag, *she becomes like a woman performing as a man dressed like a woman*. There's an ironical conflict between wanting to play as a "woman" in order to show that women *do* play, and choosing to being represented by a highly sexualized avatar that is interpreted oppositely from what was intended.

A tightrope walk:

MajorM performs a constant balancing between various desires, and a constant performance of gender with gender as a guide. For her, gaming at times becomes a tightrope-walk between a desired activity and a desired identity. I find MajorM's negotiations to be very clear examples of the complexity of "trying to pass" both as a legitimate gamer and a legitimate woman. In situations or contexts where the norms and expectations are traditional, a more careful tightrope walk must be performed. Very often she ends up being the "*I'm a gamer, but only in front my computer.*" (And in many ways she is close to the invisible or secret gamer that Mette is presenting shortly.)

A final remark: As I mentioned in the beginning: the concept "gamer" is not gender-neutral. Believing that *the* gamer is a gender-neutral figure, is to accept the omnipresent idea of the male gamer, thereby supporting the exact structures that are keeping women from gaming. It is the way technology is thought of that is at stake. Games are shaped in the social relations that produce and use them. Content needs to change as well as and along with the conception of *the* gamer.