

Gaming Moms: Juggling Time, Play and Family Life.

Specific goals

As console gaming increasingly is displacing TV-watching as the core living-room activity, and more and more people, young and old, devote more and more time and money to playing video games, it becomes vital to understand the role gaming plays in family life.

The main goal is to examine family life through the lens of gaming in families where the mother is an avid gamer. Thus, we also look at gaming through the lens of the mother. Until now, the focus on female gamers has been limited to teenagers and young, unattached women but since gaming is an activity for all ages, a missing key to understanding the role of gaming in family life is to look at gaming mothers. This is important because female gamers with families are often playing in a distinct situation that involves intertwined normative gendered ideas of work, family roles, and leisure, time and place constraints. Games, due to their traditional definition as objects of personal time-consuming pleasures may cause direct or indirect conflict with other everyday activities. This conflict is usually associated with children's high consumption of computer games. But, what happens in the families where mom is a gamer? Gaming moms are mothers who do not stereotypically support or deny the gaming of the rest of the family, but moms who are active and enthusiastic gamers themselves. How is this role negotiated and contested? How does gaming influence, change and organize adult women's and their families' everyday life? And how do women organize their gaming/life?

Gaming mothers have largely been invisible in popular discourse, or formulaic ally portrayed as either unsympathetic to, or policing, the gaming habits of other family members. By calling attention to gaming moms, we wish to modulate the stereotypes of gamers and the stereotypical construction of gamer identities; games are not just for adolescent males and children, and women don't just play casual games.

The phenomenon of mothers who play has not previously been examined. Turning our interest to mothers and the much debated activity of gaming, we tap into the area of gender roles, family time management and issues of equality and examine the elsewhere contested status of gaming in the family of the gaming mom.

Project description

Background, previous research and results within the area

Researchers, the games industry and media have finally realized it - girls play games. The stereotypical image of the boy-nerd in the bedroom is at least statistically dissolving and gradually being replaced by new gamer demographics; although media stereotypes prevail, statistics show increasing numbers of female gamers (Entertainment Software Association; Swedish Games Industry).

Adult female gamers have been included in research on MUDs and MMOGs (Mortensen 2003; Taylor 2006; Copier 2007), but received very sparse focused attention (Yates & Littleton 2001; Kerr 2003; Royse et al 2007). Still, most of the player research has focused on young people – girls and boys – (e.g. Cassell & Jenkins 1998; Linderoth & Bennerstedt 2007; Jenson & de

Castell 2008) and we have yet to account in detail and with nuance of the gaming practices of particularly attached women over 25, who often also have children.

Gaming can be a very time-consuming activity, especially online gaming. If we assume that attached adult female gamers lead lives that contain responsibilities dissimilar to those of (single) men and women without children, their relationship to, and conditions for, gaming becomes a different one. That relationship will also generate different outcomes of high social relevance as issues of gender equality are brought to the fore. Female gamers with families often play in a distinct situation that involves being surrounded by normative gendered ideas of work, roles, and leisure, time and place constraints.

There seems to be something major at stake when adult women game; the ‘confession’ “I’m a full-on gamer and my husband hates me” was according to CNN.com shared by Senior Vice President of global sales and marketing at Sony Online Entertainment, Torrie Dorrell, at a meeting held in conjunction with the recent GDC conference in San Francisco in February 2008.

more and more husbands and boyfriends are playing second fiddle to computer games and consoles as 38 percent of gamers are female, spending an average of 7.4 hours a week playing, according to the Entertainment Software Association. (cnn.com, 2008-02-28)

Although superficially jocose, the rhetoric employed both by CNN and Dorrell signals that despite years of efforts and accomplishments of the women’s movement, the traditional tension between women’s right to their own activities - being a subject in her own right - and women’s assigned roles as the *other* - supporting the male, the house, the family including taking care of the kids - still remains. When women take the wheel, grab the gavel, point the gun or lead the raid guild, society perceives her action as a double escape – she does not only prefer the virtual before the real, which as the general discourse on real/unreal tells us is a suspicious and detested move, but she “flees” from her family duty as caregiver and steps out of her traditional role.

One of these roles is being the domestic guardian. Despite years of battle against gender stereotypes and inequality, despite holding full-time jobs and the same diplomas as men, women, especially as they enter into relationships and have children, still are given (and assume) the main responsibility for the organization of the domestic sphere including upholding routines, cultural traditions, social relations and fostering the kids (Magnusson 2006). Among these ‘duties’ have been *policing* the play activities of others; mothers complain - apart from calling the game companies about their no-good games - about the children watching too much television or playing too much videogames (Cassell & Jenkins 1998; Kerr 2003). When parents, mothers, dedicate time to ‘childish’ play – what happens to parental roles and control functions?

When women want to devote more time to themselves and to activities that are not directly related to the housekeeping or work, traditional structures are, or need to be, broken up. It is commonplace that women who “get to do what they want” are financially independent, unmarried or have no children. If that is not the case, women traditionally adjust their schedules, work half-time (thus making less money) or do the household chores after work in their leisure time, and first then they take time off (Friberg 1990). Supposedly this routine is reflected in women’s gaming habits – women reportedly like casual games or short games. Geek Woman, founder of the Australian site game-vixen.com and avid games journalist, calls it the “home

chaos factor”; women’s play of more flash based puzzle, quizzes and games with shorter start-up and duration, which could be interpreted as female gamers adjusting their playing practices to fulfill their daily duties. However, research also shows that adult females like to play MMOGs (Yee n.d.) and a study from 2004 reveals that women over 40 who play online games spend far more time playing than male or teenage gamers.(AOL).

The CNN report mentions 7 hours a week; gaming often take a lot more time than that and when a player is really dedicated she becomes included in a online network that requires her participation at certain times; gameplay on offline playstation and wii consoles can be interrupted immediately whereas online multiplayer games may require adapting to other players’ schedules and involve management duties and considerable time investments. Gaming thus risks coinciding with other family chores and potentially causes direct or indirect conflict with the everyday which is a traditional dilemma for women (Stanfors 2007). How do mothers work gaming into their lives, e.g. to handle potential conflicts surrounding their game time?

Theory

How does one study gaming moms? Theoretically we build on ethnology, gender studies and the new but growing field of game studies. Gaming can be said to be our time’s latest and most quickly growing cultural genre. We espouse the view that games are “social artifacts” always in the “process of becoming” (Malaby 2005), a perspective that more easily explains their relationship to society. This view is in line with the fundamental ethnological view of culture as continuous process (Ehn & Löfgren 2001). Vital in these processes are, apart from the games themselves, the gamers.

These social artifacts called games offer a particular challenge to traditional approaches to studying everyday life since they force researchers to problematize their formal status as cultural objects of play – traditionally perceived as activities cordoned off from ‘serious’ real-life activities. In the case of gaming moms, the border between game and non-game seems on the one hand to be firmly appealed to by those strongly opposed to treating gaming as an acceptable daily activity, and, on the other, as seriously eroded.

The concept of the border comes partly from conceptions of play as children’s activities; much research focuses play as an activity performed by children (Johansson 2002; Aarsand & Aronsson 2007). The border also emerges in Huizinga’s theory from the 1930s where play is a separate activity, a “magic circle” cut off from real-life, with its own time and space. In addition, play is often perceived as Caillois (1960) theorized it: a “voluntary” and “unproductive” activity. But, with the growth and development of the internet, the expansion of game culture, virtual online worlds including MMOGs, such as *World of Warcraft*, it is acknowledged that not only the media and entertainment landscape change (Livingstone 2002), but also the everyday organization of human life.

The magic is, however, increasingly contested (Pargman et al 2006). Play can thus no longer comfortably be sorted under the category of children’s activities or separated from work (Taylor 2006). When grown-ups play they defy a long-standing tradition of division between adulthood and childhood. In contemporary society the extension of the youth-period on life has become more or less generally accepted, still play is not an uncontroversial activity. The play of women, we would argue, contradicts even more rules and boundaries as on-line activities open frontiers

beyond the home onto an uncontrollable world endowing women with a historically controversial mobility that leaves her un-contained despite her situation in the home (Enevold 2000, 2003).

Gaming problematizes not only space but also time because *gaming takes time* and competes with other daily activities. In everyday practice, time is of the essence. Balancing work, play and family life involves managing time. People and activities compete over time. Davies (1996) concluded that women tend to work in gender-specific ways involving multi-tasking and responsibilities that are not always measurable. Typical women's 'duties', such as nurturing and care-giving do not start and stop at a certain time and overlap with other activities. She thus argued that time be seen as relational rather than linear. Although we believe that it is important not to essentialize gender differences in time- experiences and use, we find it useful to think of the juggling of everyday activities in terms of gender-specific time management, because as Schott & Horrell discovered "gaming slots into the existing nexus of domestic power" (2000:49); in their study adult female gamers thought their male partners had more time for play because they did not feel they had to do household chores – "tasks which women felt took precedence of leisure activities" (qtd. in Royse et al:559).

Collecting and processing information about gaming moms, we need a unifying approach and a way to "read sense into our interviews" (Silverman in Czarniawska 2004:viii). The narrative approach provides a means to this end. Using stories has for a long time been practiced in ethnology and is now adopted and disseminated by many disciplines. In addition to the work on narrative methods by Czarniawska (e.g. 2003 and 2004) our study is informed by a number of qualitative research efforts, all of which are quoted in conjunction with the various methods listed below.

Methods

We firmly believe, with Aarseth (2003) and Sotamaa et al. (2005), that all game research must include playing the games. Whether this is seen as going native or taking the ludological perspective, that is, paying respect to the specificity of games as a particular genre, we find that it is essential to gain a full understanding of the gaming practices of gaming moms and their family situation.

- 1) The project will use a website/blog/Wiki for working with, presenting and communicating its aims and results. The site will also be used as a means for enrolling participants in the study, all aspects of which aim to grasp gaming mom's interfacing with the "magic circle".
- 2) Participants will be chosen and contacted through a) call for participants on the website, b) through game sites, c) personal contacts d) announcing our call through the research network and to our students – many of whom are older. Women might need to be hand-picked and drafted individually; previous studies (e.g. Kerr 2003) have shown the difficulty of getting enough women to interview. Thus, a way may be to obtain informants by way of recommendation. In case face-to-face interviews cannot be carried out, alternative channels will be used including CMC (computer-mediated communication) and phone (Björvik 2007). We hasten to add that our focus on mothers does not exclude single-parent families or same-sex parental relationships. We also foresee that our focus on mothers will invite comparative

perspectives with fathers', partners' and children's perspectives on gaming in family life, but due to the scope of the study, we feel unable to incorporate it into our plan at this stage.

- 3) Qualitative face-to-face interviews (Kvale 1996). Twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews with mothers in households of varying composition who game on a regular basis. The goal is to follow the core base of informants over a time period of three years.
- 4) Focus group interviews (Wibeck 2000). Four interviews will be carried out with groups of 5-6 women. The common interest in gaming provides a natural object to gather round. Taking the cue from Turkle's (1995) equivalent of focus-groups, the pizza-party, we aim to create a light-hearted, hopefully attractive and comfortable environment for our participants who will also be asked to complete a task (completing a picture of gamers with faces and speech balloons) concerning player-identification taken from Sotoma et al's self-documentation kit "the game-box"(2005). The purpose is twofold a) bringing women together to create potential networks is a long-standing empowering strategy for equality work, b) opening the floor for opinions and views about being a gaming mom that may not come out in interviews, shared experiences, strategies, differences, potential desires, fears and goals.
- 5) Self-documentation; video or text/blog diaries kept by informants. Due to the demanding nature of this task, only a small number of informants will be instructed to keep a diary of their choice for a week where they record all gaming, their own as well as other family members, noting e.g. when, where, how long, particular experiences etc., they game.
- 6) Discussion forums (Hine 2000, Svenningsson et al 2003). The aim is to keep track of approximately 2-3 game/gaming sites: how do mothers and family figure in these contexts? Rather than using quantitative Content Analysis, the forums will be scanned on a regular basis to catch relevant discussions. Forums and media (see below) are studied in the vein of Critical Discourse Analysis and will serve to provide a complementary 'public' picture of gaming moms.
- 7) Swedish news media and game magazines (Jarlbro 2006). During a limited time period of three months a selection of Swedish news media will be surveyed for content on gaming mothers, adult female gamers and gaming and family.
- 8) Participant observations (Öhlander 1999) with field-noting (van Maanen 1988). We will select a number of participants who we will a) observe during play and b) play together with. By observing the player in her gaming situation we want to trace the interplay of gaming and other activities assuming that play-style is influenced by and influencing everyday life practices; by playing together with or alongside her, our aim is also to allow for game-specificity to emerge, which serves to acknowledge the influence game types exert on gaming practices. To paraphrase what Malinowski noted about this method many years ago: it may to a certain extent bridge the gap between what gamers say they do and what they actually do.

Time Plan, and a selection of the most significant activities to be carried out

YEAR				Planned deliverables

2009 Attend 2-4 relevant conferences, DIGRA, writing etc The 31st Nordic Ethnology and Folklore conference 2009; DAC	Media Survey; Prepare list of questions for focus groups.	Produce/set up website/blog; Issue call for /recruit informants	Perform: 10 structured in-depth interviews 2 focus-group interviews (5 people in each= 10)	Submit publishable paper for presentation at DIGRA (Digital Games Research Association)
2010 Attend conf. writing etc Attend Game Developers Conference (GDC)	Media Survey, Produce self-documentation kit;	Recruit 6 partic. for self-document. study	Perform: 6 Participant Observations. Qualitative content analysis of webforums	Articles for a) Game-related journal b) cultural study/ ethnology/ sociology journal
2011 Attend 2-4 relevant conferences DIGRA, writing etc	Media Survey	Follow-up interviews with as many of the original interviewees as possible	Perform: 10 structured in-depth interviews 2 focus-group interviews	Submit publishable paper for presentation at DIGRA (Digital Games Research Association)
2012 attend conf. Writing etc (GDC)	Tying up loose ends	Writing up final report Update site w results	Project evaluation	Final Report

Significance

As games consume more and more time and place not only in children's but adults' lives, and research and society by way of media, public discourse and game sales signal that gaming is a considerable gendered practice with major economic and socio-cultural impact, we are obliged to investigate how this practice possibly restructures human life and roles, and vice versa how we restructure our roles and lives according to them. The phenomenon of mothers who play has not previously been examined. Our study will diversify and illuminate the image of the gamer and his/her activities, which has stereotypically been seen as a social activity for teenage boys playing violent games. Answering the questions posed by our study entails investigating the cross-sectional phenomena of games, gender and equality all of which are of crucial social, cultural and economic significance. It is important to understand the relationships between games and society. Equality is a legislated political goal – investigating the everyday practices of women around conflict-ridden, inter-generational, time-consuming, cross-sectional phenomena such as gaming will take a measure of equality as it takes place in practice. The function of women's everyday life can be said to be a measure of the practical status of equality in Western contemporary family life and, as a consequence, society.

Preliminary results/studies within the research area.

We have done studies on games and naming practice, games, gender and love, and games, gender and mobility. The current project was presented in Umeå as late as March 28, 2008. See CV and list of publications.

International and national research cooperation

The TRUANTS- an international network of 35 researchers, most of which also play the game of *World of Warcraft* with weekly on-line in-game meetings, publishing activities and offline meetings, seminars and conferences. The TRUANTS act as a network and expertise on games. It includes researchers from a variety of fields among them leading game scholars T.L. Taylor and Espen Aarseth both from IT-U of Copenhagen Center for Computer Games Research. Other researchers: Jonas Linderoth (media and pedagogy), Learn-IT, Göteborg U; Torill Mortensen (media and communication), Volda U, Norge/HumLab, Umeå; Hilde Corneliussen,(gender and games) U of Bergen; Ragnhild Tronstad (aesthetics, media and games) U of Oslo. Members of TRUANTS since 2006, we have well established cooperation and contact with the group, access to our on-line archive of screenshots, a discussion list, a research WIKI, and a blog to which we all can contribute. The TRUANTS have convened at the Game in' Action in Göteborg 2007 and Humans, Culture and Computer Games, in Umeå 2008.

Ethical Considerations

The study includes interviews and observations; it is open to being reviewed for ethical concerns and money is sought for this particular end. We have documented practical experience working with ethically sensitive material (e.g. Hagström 2006). We will as a rule anonymizes names, age, and other elements that might reveal the identification of our interviewees (Alver & Øyen 1998). Gathering data from the Internet we follow the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers. As far as the analysis of the text and images goes anonymization will of course be made here too and proper credit given to sources. Publishing will be performed with the informed consent of the interviewees, and results will be published on the blog.

Gender Perspective

A gender perspective permeates the study and is supported by our previous research in feminist cultural studies (Enevold 2003) and ethnologies on family and masculinity (Hagström 1999).