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Who are the casual gamers? Gender tropes and tokenism in game culture

Lina Eklund

Digital gaming (henceforth, gaming) constitutes a still expanding activity. At present we know that the population of gamers is large and wide-ranging with an estimated 40–50 per cent of the Western population now engaged in digital games (e.g. Kallio, Kaipainen and Mäyrä 2007; Juul 2010). This extensive involvement is largely owing to what Juul (2010) dubbed *A Casual Revolution*. Owing to technological advances and a more mature industry, new games attract audiences previously unfamiliar with gaming. Yet, research on gaming often builds on self-selected samples picked by posting on websites aimed at gamers and/or by using snowball sampling (e.g. Griffiths, Davies and Chappell 2003; Quandt, Grueninger and Wimmer 2008; Juul 2010; de Schutter 2011). These targeted samples are often motivated by a desire to scrutinize specific groups or subsets of gamers. However, as the general body of gamers today are far from a small minority (Kallio, Kaipainen and Mäyrä 2007; Juul 2010) additional research using representative samples is needed. In other words, samples which allow us to make statistical generalizations about digital gaming in the general population. Therefore, this chapter reports on results from a study using data from a nationally representative

survey of over 2,611 Swedes, aged 12–100, dealing with computer, Internet and digital game practices. The chapter focuses on ‘casual gaming’, with the aim of investigating this gaming audience in detail, using a representative sample. The data is Swedish, yet results are of relevance for most Western contexts due to similarities in usage patterns of digital gaming in this region and, as Sweden is often considered a forerunner in relation to the spread of digital technology (Bilbao-Osorio, Dutta and Lanvin 2013), the research context can shed light on the expanding use of these technologies.

Growth of casual games

Here, the term digital game is used as a label for all types of games mediated by technology. Digital games are engaged with on a screen, they take electricity to run and, perhaps most important, the computer rather than the player upholds the rules (Juul 2005). The computer frees us from keeping track of what we can or cannot do; a move not permitted will simply not be allowed. From early arcade games such as *Space Invaders*, to modern online games such as *Star Wars–The Old Republic* built around the rich and intricate Star Wars universe, games have changed in form as well as gained in complexity as computers can maintain intricate fictional worlds. Yet, at the same time as digital gaming changed, so did those engaging with them, the gamers.

The history of digital games has been told in many ways over the years (and in reality it is rather histories, in plural, than history). The description below is one story among many and focuses on the dialectic interplay between technology and users; technological advances made more types of games available as well as more ways of playing them, which attracted new audiences. Yet at the same time demands by new and old users spurred developments as creators match market demands, resulting in an iterative process of expansion, adoption and development of games and technologies. For example, the growth and success of touch-based games played on tablets and smartphones followed individuals searching for ways to fully utilize their new touch technology.

The first commercial digital games were adult activities, as arcade games appeared in pubs (Williams 2006). As consoles became available for private use they were then marketed as family entertainment – available to play in the family home. However, after the video game market collapsed in 1983 the industry needed a new approach. When Japanese Nintendo released their Famicom console – the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in the West – they aimed their product at children, foremost boys, in order to find a

more secure audience. As Krotoski (2005) has shown, before this, the gaming industry aimed games at everyone – men and women, old and young alike.

This shift towards young men changed ideas about who the consumers of digital games were, and this strategy in production and marketing still prevails. During the 1980s and early 1990s, digital games were seen as boys' toys and game developers were/are almost solely men (Haddon 1988) leading to a marginalization of female users. Since then three major waves of social and technological changes can be identified that have impacted on the game audience. The following simplified exposé is not meant to give a complete background to gaming, but is rather meant to offer historical context.

In the mid-1990s the first 'pink games' wave hit the game industry in the wake of the very successful *Barbie Fashion Designer*. Game companies making games for girls cropped up, some aiming to make money by broadening the audience and some trying to encourage female gaming, arguing that it provided important technological knowledge (Beavis 2005; Hayes 2005). Pink games are still flourishing, although they have been heavily criticized for polarizing the market into girl and boy games and ignoring adult female gamers (Kafai et al. 2008). Gender stereotypes and female inclusion in game culture is still a controversial and hotly debated topic, as seen in the recent #GamerGate debacle. See the Afterword to this volume for a more detailed discussion by Shaw and Chess.

A second major shift also occurred in the 1990s with the spread and growth of the Internet and a whole new genre of games that could be played with others online. These online games allowed gamers to compete and collaborate in massive digital worlds. Online games attracted an older and more mixed user group (Griffiths, Davies and Chappell 2003) and some have argued that they also opened up the game medium further for women (Taylor 2006). Thus, research and user demographics of online gaming made us aware that digital gaming was not something only the young engaged in and that the game audience was growing up.

The third major change, referred to as *A Casual Revolution* (Juul 2010), gained momentum around 2005. Owing to technological advances and a more mature industry, digital games were being developed that attracted an audience previously unfamiliar with the medium, as well as gamers who had 'grown up' and started families of their own. Digital games played in web browsers became popular, as well as party games such as *Dance Dance Revolution*. In 2006 the Nintendo Wii, advertised as a family entertainment machine, was released, in a sense returning to the roots of consoles as family entertainment. Digital gaming today comprises more than the classical *Super Mario* or first-person shooter (FPS) games that often get to symbolize this medium. Facebook games, exercise games, smartphone and touchpad

games and much more are genres and platforms for digital games that have expanded the medium in an era where so many people have a range of technologies available to play games on.

Casual games and gamers

The term 'casual gaming' came about as digital games as well as users became more diverse and different designations came into use to contrast early digital gaming (hardcore) to what were perceived as new (casual) game types, genres and gamers. Dividing gamers into hardcore and casual is now one of the bases for understanding different types of games/ers both in academia and industry classification (Juul 2010). Casual games tend to have more positive fictions featuring no or cartoonish violence, require little previous knowledge of games, allow players to play in short bursts and practise excessive positive reinforcement of success (*ibid.*). Casual games are lighter, easier to play and flexible (Kultima 2009). In contrast, hardcore games are seen as heavier, featuring violence and dark themes and taking time to learn (Juul 2010).

The portrayal of game types is closely connected to preconceptions of who engages in these games. Casual gamers are often portrayed as female, especially in reports from the game industry (Kuittinen et al. 2007) and in news reports (e.g. Wolverton 2007; Calvin 2013; Enright 2013); and female gamers are seen as preferring casual game genres (Krotoski 2005). The term 'casual' is furthermore often used to describe a play style (Kuittinen et al. 2007) and this way of playing, with less time investment and dedication is often, both from the game community and industry, connected to female gamers (Juul 2010). Some have argued that casual genres demand less time investment and are easier to pick up and play, thereby making them more accessible to women who still take on the majority of unpaid labour in the West, resulting in more fragmented leisure time (Winn and Heeter 2009).

However, research has questioned this simple division into male and female gaming practices. Female gamers are a sizable part of the gaming demographic, yet excluded from mainstream gaming culture. Women are the 'others' in digital gaming, resulting in an image of female casual gamers and male hardcore gamers (Royse et al. 2007; Jenkins and Cassell 2008; Vanderhoef 2013). The casualization/feminization of gaming seems a pervasive ideology in digital games culture. The question is whether it holds up to scrutiny: does the ideology match actual practices of men and women? A question we turn to now.

Method and data

The study data is from the 2011 survey *Swedes and the Internet* (Findahl 2011), the annual Swedish contribution to the *World Internet Project*. The survey included a battery of questions related to social digital gaming, constructed by the author in collaboration with the organization responsible for the survey (.SE Trust). The simple random sample is representative based on age (from twelve years and up, the oldest respondent 100 years old), gender and residence, with 2,611 survey answers. While there is no information on response rates, each year approximately 700 individuals are new recruits because of dropouts from earlier years (WII 2010). In this year's sample, that would give a hypothetical external dropout rate of 26 per cent. Of respondents, an over-representation of individuals interested in the Internet is possible, as this is the survey focus. For study variables, attrition was not higher than 1 per cent. Listwise deletion was used for analysis. All survey questions are translated into English by the author.

The main variable is: 'Which of the following genres of digital games do you engage in?' People answering that they did at least occasionally engage in digital games were asked to pick all game genres relevant for them from a list. It is notoriously difficult to sort games into genres and there are no accepted standards (Mortensen 2009, 35–40). The fifteen chosen genres¹ were aimed at capturing as many types of games as possible and there may be some overlap as well as exclusions. The category 'casual puzzle games' was called 'casual games' in the survey but has been renamed here to avoid confusion with the overall analytical aim. To make up for any potential genres not listed, an 'other' category was added with a free text option. These were manually coded into corresponding genres when applicable. Some genres with few answers or which seemed improperly defined are excluded from the analyses.² Additional variables include gender, age and time spent on gaming. The data is analyzed using principal component analysis and measures of correlation with Pearson's R and Spearman's rank.³

Results

Results show that almost 43 per cent ($n = 1,120$) of Swedes between twelve and 100 years old play digital games. Most gamers are found in the young-, adult- and middle-aged groups. In the group aged 80+ we find only nine gamers, four men and five women, engaging in a mix of traditional, adventure, learning, simulation and other games. Gamers have access to a range of

technologies in their home and all gamers, logically, had access to hardware that could be used to play games on.

Gamers were encouraged to pick all game genres they engage in and on average each gamer choose 2.5 game genres (mean 2.5; median 2). In total this gave about 2,800 measurement points. A principal component analysis was run on the different genres, aiming to see if certain genres ‘belonged’ together, that is if playing some genres make gamers more likely to also engage in other genres.

In the outcome of the analysis, displayed in Table 2.1, three separate categories crystallized. Category 1 consists of genres often considered more ‘dedicated’, massive multiplayer online (MMOs), strategy, FPS, role-playing games (RPGs), adventure and (web) browser games which are often multiplayer, asynchronous games.

Social network games (SNGs), casual puzzles, point-n-click (PnC), party and racing/sports games all load together in category 2 (Table 2.1). These are genres often associated with ‘casual’ games, except perhaps sports and

Table 2.1 Principal component analysis of game genres (Varimax rotation) investigating internal structure to best explain variance in the data

Genres	1	2	3
Traditional			0.83
Social network		0.32	
Casual puzzle		0.56	
Point-n-click		0.53	
Party		0.72	
Racing/Sports		0.55	
Browser	0.38		
MMO	0.64		
Strategy	0.69		
FPS	0.63		
RPG	0.63		
Adventure	0.53		

racing games. Yet, we know that, at least for sports games, the audience is largely constructed of fans of that particular sport (Stein, Consalvo and Mitgutsch 2013); people play sports games because they are sports fans. Sports and racing games are generally easy to pick up, can be played in short bursts of time and contain close visual resemblance to their offline prototypes. The first two characteristics are shared with casual games in general and are likely why we find these genres together.

Traditional games, such as card games, are found in category 3 (Table 2.1); these games often come pre-installed on computers as free software and often have strong representational links to their analogue versions.

In the dedicated category 1, we find many large, costly productions, with browser games being the exception. Browser games, together with SNGs, are the lowest charged genres, thus less clearly belonging in their respective category. It is likely that these genres are less coherent, for example browser games contain many different types of games; moreover, SNGs require a social network account and might therefore have a selected audience not corresponding to other genres. While the casual and dedicated game categories could be interpreted as divided up by hardware, some genres defy this division (e.g. party games), suggesting that willingness to purchase hardware is not the crucial explanation why these games go together in people's consumption habits.

Who are the gamers?

While the following results focus on casual games, some comparisons with 'dedicated game genres' are made. Furthermore, traditional games are included in the analyses as these are elsewhere often counted as casual games (see for example IGDA 2006; Juul 2010; de Schutter 2011), although results here suggest they should be seen as two different game categories.

Of all gamers, 41 per cent engaged in traditional games (e.g. *Solitaire*, *Bridge*), 25 per cent in casual puzzle games (e.g. *Bejewelled*, *Angry Birds*), 25 per cent in sports and car-racing games (e.g. *Need for Speed*, *Mario Kart*, *FIFA*), 21 per cent in party games (e.g. *Singstar*, *Guitar Hero*), 16 per cent in SNGs (e.g. *Farmville*) and 11 per cent in PnC games (e.g. *Sam and Max*, *Agatha Christie*).

Figure 2.1 displays the time invested in different genres and it shows that up to five hours a week is the typical time investment on games in the casual category, even though higher levels of time use are represented. Traditional games are the genre on which the least amount of time is spent. On average, gamers invest more time on dedicated genres; however, MMOs stood out as a very time-demanding genre and have been represented separately (Figure 2.1).

FIGURE 2.1 *Displaying cross tabulations of genre and time spent on gaming per week.*

While dedicated game genres seem to encourage a higher time investment, a not-insignificant time use does show for casual games (Figure 2.1). Looking at a separate cross tabulation for only the casual genres and time spent on gaming, we find that 27 per cent (data not shown) spend more than ten hours a week on average on games in this category. This supports previous research arguing that both casual and dedicated gamers can spend high amounts of time on gaming (Juul 2010), making time invested on gaming an unreliable proxy, at best, for dedication to digital gaming.

Analysing the gender spread of casual game genres as well as traditional games offers some interesting results. Figure 2.2 shows that women and men equally consist of around half of the audience of these genres, racing and sports games being the exception with women constituting around a quarter of the audience. This does not seem to be because women have less access to consoles; party games are also mostly console-based. However, considering the masculine connotations of both racing and sports and the marginalization of women in these genres, for example the lack of female teams in sports games, the percentage of women is surprisingly high.

For the other genres, casual puzzle, social network, traditional, party and PnC games, the audience comprises of roughly fifty-fifty men and women (Figure 2.2). When running correlation tests on gender and genre, only sports and racing games have a significant, albeit weak, effect; men are more likely to engage in sports and racing games (Spearman's rank = 0,23, sig, 0,000). Therefore, while these genres in general discussions as well as previous research are often talked about as female genres, in reality, when using a simple random sample instead of a self-selected sample, a relatively even gender spread emerges.

FIGURE 2.2 *Cross tabulation of percentage of men and women engaged in different genres.*

In contrast, dedicated game genres are more uneven, for example women constitute 32 per cent of the adventure game audience but only 10 per cent of the FPS audience and 12 per cent of the MMO audience. This number includes all MMOs and it is possible that there is variation between different MMOs. MMOs are a genre that due to the social intensive gameplay, are often considered popular among women. However, as more people in total play FPS there are actually more women playing FPS games than MMOs. The perception of MMOs as female-friendly compared to the ‘traditional masculine topics’ such as war and combat in FPS games seem to hide the actual popularity of these genres.

Figure 2.3 displays the distribution of gamers in each age group, which are shown separately as percentage of that age group. These statistics should therefore not be looked upon as absolute numbers as these groups are not equally large in society and it is important to note that these numbers include only those who play games and are not representative of these age demographics as a whole. What we can read from the figure is the popularity of different genres in different age groups of gamers.

Results show that the oldest gamers prefer traditional games, although all casual genres are represented. In the young-, adult- and middle-aged group we see a more even spread of game genres, suggesting that gaming is more established in these groups. Moreover, genres such as PnC have a relatively even usage patterns, traditional games sees a steady increase over age, and SNG use peak for 30–50-year olds (Figure 2.3).

Testing for correlations, using Pearson’s R, between age and game genre, a few genres display age variance, although the effects are very small. Gamers

FIGURE 2.3 *Percentage of gamers (X-axis) in each age group (Y-axis) who engage in different genres.*

of traditional games are older (Pearson’s $R = 0.28$, sig. 0.000), compared to gamers who do not engage in this genre, while party gamers (Pearson’s $R = -0.27$, sig. 0.000) are younger compared to gamers who do not play these games, and lastly the audience for racing and sports games is younger (Pearson’s $R = -0.25$, sig. 0.000).

Discussion

The aim of this chapter was to explore, through a simple random sample, the casual game audience. A detailed picture emerged that sheds new light on this group. On the basis of peoples’ gaming habits, game genres are clustered into three categories, named traditional, casual and dedicated.

Both console and computer games were found in the casual and dedicated category, suggesting access to hardware is not the crucial explanation. An additional conclusion that can be drawn is that having access to a console does not imply that people will try different genres. Sport and racing games, for example, clustered together with casual genres, suggesting that gamers engaging in these genres are more likely to play casual games than try dedicated genres. Traditional games, on the other hand, fall into a category of their own. An explanation is that even though this genre is so pervasive, played by 41 per cent of gamers, there is a group of mostly older gamers, who only play these types of games and no others, which sets them apart. These results should make us think about which genres are dubbed casual and dedicated in future studies, although the genre split used here is by no means final.

The results further showed that casual, traditional or dedicated game genres often did not predict time use of more than ten hours per week. The exception was MMO games which sported a much higher time investment. On the other hand, traditional games had the least time invested in them. While, as seen in Figure 2.1, dedicated genres in general showed slightly higher amounts of time use, casual genres were not far behind. These results, as previously argued (Juul 2010), indicate that time use is unreliable as an indicator of game dedication and should not be used to divide casual and dedicated gamers.

It is clear that the different casual genres and traditional games are varyingly popular in different age segments. PnC and sports/racing are more uncommon in the older age segments (51+). Individuals in these age groups grew up and entered their adult life well before the advance of digital gaming and in general tend to see computer technology more as work tools and less as play things, due to often having been introduced to computers via work (Facer et al. 2001). It is therefore likely that in the years to come, we will see an increase in digital gaming in these age groups.

Party games, on the other hand, are closely tied to a specific social setting as they are primarily engaged in with others. We know that gaming with others is more common among younger gamers (Eklund 2014) and that this is connected to life stages – younger individuals in general spend more time with friends and in social situations outside work and family. In contrast to other genres, we are unlikely to see genres such as party games become more common among older gamers. Therefore, it can be argued that it is both a generation issue – some genres will spread to older groups as today's gamers grow older – and an age-stage effect – some genres are tied to a certain stage in life, are present. These should preferably be separated when studying digital gaming.

The rest of this discussion will concern the gender distribution of casual gamers. Quite contrary to many ideas about who engages in casual games, this study showed that men and women constitute an almost equal part of the audience. A theoretical understanding of why casual gaming is understood as a female gaming domain contrary to actual composition can be found in token theory. Female gamers, as the minority group entering a male-dominated culture, gain 'token' status. Research has found that as a token, group attributes blot out aspects such as personality or performance (Kanter 1977). In other words, female gamers are seen as women before gamers, while men are simply gamers. Tokens stand out and are noticed as 'others', individuals different from the dominating group, by both old and new members of the group.

Research on organizations has shown that sex ratios affect local cultures and therefore values and behaviours (Israeli 1983). As a minority group enters

a new setting, such as women in gaming, the norms and culture of the majority group comes into question. Today it is generally agreed that there are women who game, yet by framing female gamers as casual gamers, that is not present in core gaming culture, the previously unquestioned culture can stand unhindered. Because they are different, female gamers are challenging the main group's norms and values which are built on similarity; by their very presence tokens upset balance. The division of digital games into casual and hardcore genres can then be understood as a strategy to protect the norms and values of the dominating culture against the intrusion of women and other minority groups – see, for example, the conflict surrounding the inclusion of homosexual characters in digital games (Condis 2014). Designating casual gaming as feminine 'protects' dedicated gaming, as it cordons it off from outside influence. Consequently, the tropes of women as casual gamers and men as hardcore hide the fact that the casual game category as well as traditional games are engaged in almost equally by men and women.

Conclusions

Analysis of a simple random survey sample showed that game genres in individuals' usage patterns clustered in three categories of games: traditional, casual and dedicated. Further analysis showed how most casual as well as traditional gaming was equally engaged in by both men and women, contrary to the dominating ideology which connect women with casual gaming and men with hardcore (Vanderhoef 2013).

With the rise of modernism, particularly in the late nineteenth century, the West saw the growth of mass culture. This 'new' culture was at the time designated as female, in opposition to high, authentic culture associated with men, who were also the only practitioners (Huyssen 1986). What can be learnt from history is how less valued culture became female and what was considered real became the domain of men, which is what we are seeing in contemporary game culture. Boundaries are enforced where authentic game culture is considered masculine and women involved in gaming are considered casuals – read mass culture gamers, of less value than real gamers. In this way high and low gaming culture are distinguished and threats to the norms and values of 'true' gaming culture kept at bay. The previous distinction of feminine mass culture and masculine authentic culture finally fell apart as women claimed and became part of the production of highbrow culture (Huyssen 1986), leading to the question of whether the struggle over gaming culture will only be over when women truly become part of game

development? In this context, #GamerGate clearly highlights the significance of the ongoing struggle to discredit women who are part of the production of games.

Women are currently the main target group for casual game developers (IGDA 2006); thus we have to wonder, are men playing despite the game? This is a reverse to the question often asked about dedicated female gamers. Turning our thinking on its head about gender opens up ways for considering gender and gaming where women are not always seen as the 'other' and men's gaming also take more complex forms. Likely, pervasive gendered tropes and hierarchies about 'high' and 'low' gaming culture hide male casual gamers in the same way they hide dedicated female gamers. Future studies should consider that there is likely larger in-group than between-group differences when studying men and women's gaming patterns, casual or dedicated.

Notes

- 1 Classical, social network, casual, web browser, party, strategy, point-and-click/puzzle, role-playing, first-person shooter, simulation, learning, racing and sports, adventure, massive multi-player online and other games.
- 2 Simulation was left out due to few answers. Learning games was left out as these games are played for other reasons than entertainment.
- 3 Both varies from +1 (a perfect positive relationship) to -1 (a perfect negative relationship). Anything between -0.21 and +0.21 are here considered too small to constitute a relationship.

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