research snapshot
summarize mobilize

Research on women and video games needs to improve

What is this research about?

In recent years, video games have become a billion dollar industry, drawing more and more consumers. The relationship between women and video games, however, is a murky one. Researchers have been trying to learn more about how women interact with games. But not all of their research has been useful, and there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of the work that has already been done.

What did the researcher do?

Researchers at York University and Simon Fraser University looked at research on gender and video games over the past three decades. They identified some of the problems and biases that continue to trouble this research. They also suggested some ways in which research on gender and video games might move forward.

What did the researcher find?

For decades, people have been studying how men and women interact with computers and other information technologies. But there was not much research on gender and video game play until the late-1990s. Much of this research focused on whether or not girls and women play games, whom they play with, and what

What you need to know:

Research on gender and video games often conflates gender with sex, which leads to stereotyping of girls and women. In general, research on gameplay treats women like a second sex and gender like an insignificant variable.

they like to play. It was often driven less by scholars than game developers who wanted to figure out how to get more women to buy games. As a result, it was often based on problematic assumptions that conflate 'gender' with 'sex.' Gender tends to be used to refer to cultural differences between men and women. Sex, on the other hand, tends to refer to biological differences. By conflating gender with sex, researchers imply that there is an 'essential' way in which girls and women should interact with video games. And they are apt to view, say, a young woman's preference for a particular kind of video game as proof of some sort of female 'nature' that is fixed and essential. Unfortunately, far too much of the early research on games was market-driven and focused on preferences. In doing so, it reinforced stereotypes about girls and women.

Researchers have begun to move away from those early, stereotyped accounts of gender and gameplay. It is now clear that although girls

education | YORK U
UNIVERSITÉ
UNIVERSITY

and women do play video games, the games they play and how they play them are always changing. They don't necessarily play with other girls and women either. The social context in which girls and women play video games shapes the gaming experience. Simply put, there is no evidence that women, by their very nature, prefer a particular kind of game or way of playing.

Recent research indicates that more and more women are participating in video games. Some research even suggests that women have become central consumers of games. However, the gameplay of adolescent girls, when they're at home, tends to be more strictly monitored by parents than the gameplay of boys. And women are still underrepresented in both games and the gaming industry. Girls and women, when they do appear in games, are often highly sexualized, with large breasts and lips; but men tend to be highly sexualized as well. Most of the jobs for the few women who do work in the industry are in human resources.

Research also suggests that there is no difference between men and women when it comes to the effects of violent video games on their behaviour. Studies show that when there is a link between violent games and aggressive behaviour, the link exists for both sexes.

How can you use this research?

This research will be of interest to educators, researchers, game developers, and decision-makers who are interested in how girls and women interact with video games. It points out many of the underlying problems with a lot of the existing research on gender and gameplay. Future studies should draw from larger samples and should explore, in greater depth, the experiences of girls and women as they play

games in specific settings. Existing studies tend to simply note that women play games and then move on. In other words, they place little importance on gender. There is a need for more research on male players, and, in general, research that avoids crude binaries which reinforce stereotypes about men and women. Researchers should approach gender as something that isn't innate but performed, like a role.

About the researcher

Jennifer Jenson is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University. Suzanne de Castell is Dean of the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University.

jjenson@edu.yorku.ca

Citation

Keywords

Boys, Gameplay, Games industry, Gender, Technology, Women

Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services and funding for faculty, graduate students, and community organizations seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. It is supported by SSHRC and CIHR grants, and by the Office of the Vice-President Research & Innovation.

kmbunit@yorku.ca
www.researchimpact.ca

education | YORK U UNIVERSITÉ UNIVERSITY