

Gaming Expertise

Doing Gender and Maintaining Social Relationships in the Context of Gamers' Daily Lives

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Abstract

This article argues for an attempt to rethink what counts as gaming expertise. Often, expertise is configured as a fixed and measurable rather than relational capacity – having the necessary level of knowledge with a skill to become expert, or to rise above a particular and objectively defined level of competency. Drawing on interviews with women playing the massively multiplayer online game¹ *World of Warcraft*, the article argues for an understanding of gaming expertise as a relational, highly contextual capacity, operating and embedded in everyday situations. Through the lens of gaming expertise, the article teases out the complex ways in which gender, technology and identity intersect and are constructed and negotiated in different social contexts.

Keywords: expertise, gaming, gender, everyday life, game culture

Introduction

In digitally saturated environments, digital media users of all kinds, engaged in different areas of activity, are increasingly categorised in terms of their ability to appropriate and use digital media; they are regarded as non-users, experts, literates, or as someone possessing a natural expertise, as digital natives, for instance. Often, expertise is configured as a fixed rather than relational capacity – having the necessary level of knowledge with a skill to become expert, or to rise above a particular and objectively defined level of competency. Expertise is here regarded as something that is measurable. This is apparent in studies where expertise has been conceptualised as pertaining to a specific domain, as exceptional experts such as chess grandmasters (Chase & Simon 1973) or in comparative studies between expert and non-expert practices (Proffitt et al. 2000). When turning to the field of game studies, we find that the same conceptualisations of expertise often pervade; more specifically, expertise in relation to digital games and gaming has been framed as a particular kind of literacy (e.g. Steinkuehler & Duncan 2008), connected to cognitive problem-solving and spatial representation (e.g. Greenfield et al. 1994), social skills and cultural capital (e.g. Chen 2009), or sports and professionalism (Taylor 2012). Rather than continuing to view expertise as something displayed in an expert skillset of

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gamers – a form of superior ability or level of excellence – I want to shift the focus to an understanding of how digital expertise emerges and is negotiated among everyday gamers in domestic contexts.

Yates and Littleton argue that we need to understand “computer gaming as something that is constructed out of a set of practices that computer gamers engage in” (Yates & Littleton 1999: 569). Following this line of thought, I opt for viewing technology and gender as mutually shaping and intersecting *as* expertise, whereby expertise is viewed as a socio-material construction. Working within the intersections of gaming and gender, this article inevitably ties into similar and recent work within this very field. Witkowski’s work on male-dominated sporting-esque cultures and structures of high-end competitive e-sport events shows that gender and gaming culture clearly intersect, but also how the construction of gender identities is contextually dependent. Both hegemonic sporting masculinities and counter-hegemonic practices and identities can emerge within the same space (Witkowski 2013). In a different context, Shaw’s work on gamer identities points to contextuality and intersectionality as important factors to take into account, in the sense that gamer identity “exists in relation to, but is not determined by, other identities like gender, race, and sexuality” (Shaw 2012: 31).

Recently, the margins between gaming culture and gender studies have become highly contentious, as the GamerGate controversy clearly demonstrates (Salter & Blodgett 2012). This controversy is perhaps the most visible eruption of a much more ingrained hegemonic masculinity understood as “systemic structures [of] the industry and gaming culture as a whole” (Chess & Shaw 2015: 208-209). As Consalvo (2012) has pointed out, the current gaming culture can be toxic in many ways. Despite the changing image of gaming being for everyone, there is still a pervasive notion of the ‘gamer’ as the straight, white male. While this article is not about GamerGate or the toxicity of gaming culture, this nevertheless points to an important point. The gendering and hegemony of specific spaces or practices are not novel topics within gaming studies, and not even specific *to* game studies; it is also ingrained in other technological contexts, which tie into notions of, among other things, expertise. Taylor argues in her seminal book on gamers in *EverQuest* for the importance of “keeping in mind the historical context, [so] we can begin to draw on past battles (and victories) over the role of women in technology and science, ‘masculine activities’, and claims for active subjective positions” (Taylor 2006: 100-101). Following Taylor’s argument, I seek to contextualise game studies within a larger context in order to tease out and unpack how expertise is contextually embedded in social contexts, both shaping and in turn being shaped by these.

For the sake of argument, this article will focus on female gamers – on how they experience, articulate and perform their gaming. The male gamers’ point of view will be included in so far as it serves to highlight a certain aspect of the argumentation and exploration of expertise, especially when discussing gaming couples. The analysis of the empirical data of course cannot offer a representative picture of what gaming looks like for European adults; neither can the results be generalised to a larger population. Instead, the intention is to push forward the theoretical discussion of ways expertise operates in different social contexts. What Yin argued furthers the idea that qualitative insights are “generalizable to theoretical positions and not to populations or universes” (Yin 2003: 10). That is, the purpose of such studies is to expand theory and not statistical generalisation.

Expertise as the intersection of gender and technology: past research

It is difficult to shake loose the hegemonic discourses and practices that surround and delimit our everyday gendered subject positions, especially in relation to technologies and expertise. While technologies can be understood as gendered due to the context or culture of their production, they also carry with them and embody what we might call particular assumptions *about* social relations. In 1987, McNeil published a collection on gender and expertise in which authors such as Cockburn, Harraway, Lynn and McNeil herself explored different avenues of expertise (McNeil 1987). Here, the authors argue that expertise is by no means a simple question of technological competency, but rather how the operating assumptions about what constitutes technology and expertise are fraught with power relations. They warn against “a technicist approach to expertise: the expectation that we can extract the knowledge without ourselves entering into the power relations” (McNeil 1987: 2). McNeil understands technology as material culture and expertise as a material social relation, and this social embedding makes it also a gendered relation.

Writing in the context of industrial production and automation in the mid to late 1980s, what was at stake in the McNeil volume was the very question of expertise. Fighting against a craft system of largely male print workers organised in craft-based unions, the jobs of women in keyboarding operating positions were not accepted as requiring skilful computational expertise. What became evident was that technology itself was a highly gendered medium of power; through processes of inclusion and exclusion it acted as “a political economy of expertise [...] distributed across both bodies and machines” (Bassett 2013: 209). Half a decade later, Cynthia Cockburn, building on the idea of the social shaping of technology (MacKenzie & Wajcman 1985), furthered this notion by arguing that

the social relations of technology are gendered relations, that technology enters into identity, and (more difficult for many to accept) that technology *itself* cannot be fully understood without reference to gender (Cockburn 1992: 33).

These authors highlight the fact that what counts as technological competence and as expertise in regards to these technologies, are highly gendered:

The construction of ‘woman’ and of ‘technology’ are not separate practices, similar, even congruent, power relations obtain. Men’s work is often defined as technical, technical work is seen as men’s work. And the obverse: women’s work is often defined as non-technical, non-technical work is seen as woman’s work (Lynn 1987: 134-135).

Moving to the field of gaming, we find that the same discourses and perceptions pervade. Here, the powerful association of masculine gamers and game designers, as well as the presumption of male technological competence and abilities, have positioned women and girls as less able, less competent and more casual gamers (Laurel 2001). This strand of research on gender and gaming has been identified as a major research pitfall, in which *gender is constructed as lack* (Jenson & de Castell 2010). Here, existence is bifurcated into sexes and persistently descriptive accounts of girls and gaming, and familiar gender assumptions are reaffirmed, which uncovers nothing new in relation to gender and gaming. The second pitfall in research surrounding gender and gaming is

gender as superfluity, where gender is invoked merely to dismiss it as an insignificant factor. Qualitative research, including reports on the number of women/girls playing computer games, tends to fall into this category of research, which neither problematises nor interrogates any of the self-evident terms (ibid.).

Research that avoids these pitfalls does so first and foremost by recasting the purpose of gender and gaming research, in which concepts and practices are destabilised or reorganised instead of merely describing and reauthorising them. What is more important is that both women and men *perceive and articulate* gaming as a specific masculine activity (Griffiths et al. 2004; Ogletree & Drake 2007; Phillips et al. 1995; Selwyn 2007; Williams et al. 2008). Yates & Littleton (1999) argue that the more fruitful approach is not to look for women that play games, or do not, but instead to determine how various players construct the act of gaming and how that process plays into their gendered identity. In a similar vein, Kerr found that the construction of particular characters and identities reveal that gender and technology intersects as a dynamic practice for female gamers (Kerr 2003).

These studies challenge the taken-for-granted presumptions traditionally attributed to gender, mobilising a framing of gender that echoes Butler: “Whether gender or sex is fixed or free it is a function of a discourse which seeks to set certain limits to analysis or safeguard certain tenets of humanism as presupposition to any analysis of gender” (Butler 1990: 12). It is here informative to consider Dovey’s concept of *technicity*. As an amalgamation of ‘technology’ and ‘ethnicity’, the concept ties into the very idea of competence and expertise:

The notion of technical virtuosity, of a particular easy adoption of and facility with technology, is a fundamental aspect of the contemporary ideal subject within the technosphere. This historical moment produces technological competence as a key marker for success as a participant in the modern culture. A focus on technicity will also enable us to emphasise the ways in which particular kinds of identity are privileged (Dovey 2007: 3).

Technicity is about the privileging of certain technological skills, the ability to adopt, handle and be at ease with new technologies, as well as the ways identities and gender are increasingly mediated by technologies and abilities, practices and relations with these technologies. The concept of technicity can, in the following, serve as a focal point for studying gaming expertise as the performance of gendered relations. Rather than approaching gaming expertise from the site of the technology or the games themselves, I focus on how these are articulated by actual gamers. This enables us to see how technologies and understandings of expertise connected to these are bound up in discourses concerning gendered identities of users; further, it also enables us to see how “[d]iscourse does not merely represent or report on pregiven practices and relations, but it enters into their articulation and is, in that sense, productive” (Butler 1995: 138). In doing so, I explore the discourses of expertise as a material social relation where gender emerges as a complex enabler of constructed media engagements and through normative practices and behaviours pertaining to gaming.

Method

The empirical data presented here stem from a triangulation of qualitative focus group interviews (Halkier 2008), offline observations of gamers' physical gaming set-ups in their homes, and three years of in-game participant observations of gaming sessions in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), for three to four hours several days a week, involving frequent and skilled gamers (Toft-Nielsen 2013). I started by conducting in-game participant observations of gaming sessions for several months, through which sessions participants for the following focus group interviews were recruited. By combining these methods, I am able to obtain and compare the players' subjective perceptions and negotiated attitudes (the focus groups), and their practices (the in-game participant observations and offline observations). In the following, I draw on the focus group interviews, as these produce specific insights specifically pertaining to gender constructions and negations that were not readily visible through in-game participant observations. Focus group interviews produce "accounts *in* action" rather than "accounts *about* action" (Halkier 2008: 10), meaning that the method is well suited for exploring how the participants interact, present, discuss and negotiate their knowledge and experiences in action, making the interview itself a "microcosm" mirroring the social, everyday context of their gaming sessions (Kvale 2007). The interviews included in the present article are three focus group interviews with twelve adult *WoW* players – three heterosexual couples, three single men and three single women; however I will only cursorily include the all male interview. While there are notable exceptions (Thornham 2008; 2011), this age bracket (adult game players) is still somewhat under-researched within gaming studies, which has traditionally focused on young people or children (Buckingham 2008; Carr et al. 2006; Livingstone 2002; Walkerdine 2007).

The participants were recruited from two *WoW* guilds² from the same European PvE-server³ of which I was a member for a period of several years. The first interview included three couples playing the game together. Gaming couples were chosen because most women are introduced to MMO games through a male relationship (Jenson & de Castell 2010) and two-thirds of all female MMO gamers play alongside their romantic partner (Yee 2008). Initially, gender was not a focal point in this first interview (genre preferences and media use were); however, some crucial insights into gender dynamics in relation to gaming quickly emerged. This prompted me to pursue the gendered constructions of gaming further in the following interviews with men and women in gender segregated groups, of which the women interviewees will be included in this article. Interviewing couples who play together as well as interviewing an all female group produces accounts of gaming both within and outside "the heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990), which reflects the social power dynamics framing and affecting the identity positions from which they speak.

The participants all knew each other in-game and they all participated in the guild-specific gaming practice of *raiding*, where multiple players together try to defeat challenging 'end-game' content in organised, achievement-oriented collaborative events. Apart from this shared practice, the participants were a very diverse group, chosen on a principle of maximum variation sampling, based on variables such as gender, age, education and location/geography. Their ages ranged from 21 to 40 and they came from different European countries (Denmark, England, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden) as well as having differences in level of employment and education, ranging from unskilled and unemployed to university students and fulltime employees, one of whom had a

PhD. In this way, the sample was strategic, meaning that the participants were deliberately chosen to cover a variety of diverse perspectives. The insights produced via this sampling method are to be understood as “a specimen perspective” of the intersections between gender and gaming expertise: “A specimen as a form of research material is not treated as either a *statement about* or a *reflection of* reality; instead, a specimen is seen as a part of the reality being studied” (Alasuutari 1995: 63); that is, it shows one of many simultaneously existing pictures of what it sometimes looks like in a gaming context. Through this method, I want to highlight how gendered identities and relations are produced or articulated *within* and *around*, and not as a direct result of, gaming.

Focus group findings: positions of inclusion and exclusion

One of the most obvious results emerging from the first study on gendered gameplay is how the three women during the couple’s focus group interview all claimed a secondary or outsider position in relation to their husband or boyfriend. Despite the fact that the couples played together every day and two of the women played more often and in longer sessions than their husband/boyfriend, the three women all positioned themselves as less able, less skilled and less knowledgeable than the men. The women constructed themselves as gendered and therefore initially as excluded as the normative gamer is gendered male. As a result of this, the women were extremely hesitant to seek out information outside the game on their own, relying solely on their boyfriend or husband to provide the information needed:

Lykke: “Well, I have a husband that tells me what I need to know”.

Line: “Yeah, me too”.

Tina: “Yeah, I’m leaving that up to Martin to find out...”.

The women positioned themselves as subjected to the more active agencies of their boyfriend/husband whereby traditional gendered power dynamics on and around gaming emerged.

What is emerging here is the notion of expertise specifically in regard to gaming capital. Consalvo introduced the concept of gaming capital “to capture how being a member of game culture is about more than playing games or even playing them well” (Consalvo 2007: 18). The concept is a re-contextualising of Bourdieu’s “cultural” capital for the field of gaming and describes a highly contextual and dynamic currency, which entails being knowledgeable about game information, knowing where to find that information and knowing what to do with it. Consalvo recognises that gaming capital is sought by players and becomes instantiated in a diverse range of user practices and productions – such as knowing what to do in-game and when to do it, and installing and configuring game add-ons and interface modifications. We may read this concept in light of digital expertise, which helps to frame expertise as something pertaining to other aspects than just the act of playing the game. Gaming capital connects digital expertise to a range of out-of-game practices, and in all three focus groups the men continuously claimed gaming capital at the same time as the women clearly did not. Both the female and the male gamers coded these out-of-game competencies as strictly masculine, and as such the women left it to the men to perform them.

Moreover, what was echoed again and again in the interviews, by both men and women, was the perception of the normative gamer as gendered male; the women described gaming as “a men’s club”, “for the boys”, something “these blokes do”; a masculine domain into which women can be invited, but where “there is a lot of sexism going on” and the women run the risk of being positioned as “the token female”, as one female interviewee describes it. These findings echo earlier studies in that there is “an assumed [...] included (men) or excluded (women) position articulated in relation to the medium” (Thornham 2008: 132). What is at stake here is more broadly a gendered technological competence, which:

[H]as less to do with actual skills and more to do with construction of a gendered identity – that is, women lack technological competence to the extent that they seek to *appropriately perform* femininity; correlatively, men are technologically competent by virtue of their *performance* of masculinity (Jenson & de Castell 2010: 54).

By *not* claiming gaming capital and positioning themselves as ignorant in regard to the out-of-game practices, the women claim what Walkerdine has termed “the habitual ‘feminine’ position of incompetence” (Walkerdine 2006: 526). This position is echoed in the interviews themselves where the women let the men do almost all of the talking and explaining. It is also echoed in Martin and Tina’s domestic gaming practices, where Martin’s dual-boxing – playing two characters on two different computers at the same time – results in Tina *not* having her computer to play on, even if she wants to. Martin’s gaming practices are here given precedence, in regard to both technology and time. This highlights the fact that gender and technology mutually constructed each other, to the extent that it was also the women’s gaming time that was cut short due to domestic chores and housework – making dinner, doing dishes, cleaning etc. – which clearly demonstrates how “gaming sloths into the existing nexus of domestic power” (Schott & Horrell 2000: 49). Some of the female interviewees were very aware of how gaming technologies and gender intersect in different ways, as they articulate how different technologies are coded along specific gendered lines:

Kirsten: “Well *WoW* is related to *Dungeons and Dragons* and... when my ex was playing it I said, you’re never gonna get me playing that, you know [...]. I think people think more of ... like *Call of Duty* and games like that as reasonable online games. Because they are games that relate to the PlayStation, the Xbox, the Wii – all generic game consoles, whereas this is purely a PC game, and a fantasy PC game at that, so people tend to look at it that way...”

Nessa: “Everyone has a PlayStation or a Wii or an Xbox, some kind of console, and it is seen as ... cool, what everybody has no matter how different they are, whereas PC games they have always had this ... like the geek image or something. It’s just how it is, and if you say you are a girl playing it, it’s ‘What, why, why would you do that?’... you know”.

We see here how genre choices, the activity of gaming, the technology itself and the cultural heritage of gaming are all gendered and coded as always already masculine, having a “geek image”. All of these must be carefully negotiated if and when the women are to engage with them: especially in regard to what kind of gaming activities are admissible

and sought after. Because the women *do* use the same technologies as the men, they *do* play the same game and they *do* engage in the same type of gameplay, but they perceive, frame and negotiate it quite differently. The three women interviewed together defined themselves as gamers in opposition to their ex-boyfriends or ex-husbands through the notion of “the geek”: as in “my geeky ex-boyfriend”. One of the women “was engaged to a ... geek basically”, another had a boyfriend, who was “a bit of a geek”, while a third woman was married to “a complete geek”. Here, the women demarcate “normal”, female gaming practices from “geek” male forms of gaming. What this entails becomes clear in a comment made by Tina. At one point she got so caught up in *WoW* that she completely lost track of time, framing the incident, as “I was the geek”. It is interesting that the notion of “geek gaming” is found throughout the interviews with both the couples and the women, where sanctioned modes of gaming are discussed and labelled. Kirsten tells how her “geeky ex-boyfriend” “didn’t want to play with other people, he wanted to play as a single player, whereas I loved the social aspect of the game”. Nessa backs up Kirsten’s experiences:

I really agree with the socializing part because my boyfriend, he really didn’t care, he was just doing his quests [...] and I was just standing talking to people for hours in-game [...]. So I went over to his house to see what he was doing and I got really interested in it just by myself and I thought, hey, this may be a good way to sort of keep in touch a bit more, you know, because he had become a bit more distant, so I bought the game myself.

The women all rationalize their time spent gaming as legitimate due to the *social function* of the game. They demarcate “solo gaming” from “social gaming” and discursively install a binary between the wrong, *geeky* way to play the game and the normal, right way to play it and this demarcation is carefully drawn. This echoes Thornham who in a slightly different context found, that “for normal gamers, games are *useful* in their *function* as social devices [...]. ‘Geek’ gaming is excessive and anti-social pleasurable gaming, laden with signifiers of the lone perverted male.” (Thornham 2008: 134). These similarities between my own project and previous research projects investigating gender and technology point to such parallels as not just a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1990: 179) but perhaps also highlight how the sedimentation of some acts, over time produces hegemonic behaviour (ibid.: 171-180). Throughout the interviews, we find a careful distinction and negotiation around what kind of gaming skills and aspects of gaming expertise are admissible and what kind are deemed inappropriate. These are gendered not only in terms of technological competencies and level of gaming capital but also in terms of what aspects of gaming they support and permit, such as solo gaming and social gaming.

Games as social devices – everyday life and gaming

In this final section of the article, I want to shift the focus from the discourses around gaming and instead focus on the various media-related practices that surround and intersect with gaming. In doing so, I aim to show how gaming expertise and gaming practices are deeply interwoven with the fabric of everyday life in such a way that the act of playing a computer game – *gaming* – should not be viewed as an isolated activity, but rather as an “open-ended range of practices” (Couldry 2004: 4). Such an approach

starts with “media-related practice in all its looseness and openness. It asks quite simply: *what are people [...] doing in relation to media* across a whole range of situations and contexts?” (Couldry 2012: 37).

As with other technologies, integrating the PC into individuals’ and couples’ everyday lives involves a double-sided process of domestication, in which the technology is adapted to everyday life (Silverstone et al. 1991), at the same time as everyday life is adapting to technology (Aune 1996). Following this line of thought, I examine more closely how gaming as a practice by is no means limited to the individual’s consumption of specific computer games, but also involves understanding how the practice of gaming is integrated into and related to other activities, other media, and other practices involving the computer, and how these activities and practices are socially organised.

Despite the differences between the interview participants, two ubiquitous tendencies emerged. First and foremost, the interviewees were very experienced gamers, playing *WoW* almost every single day. Secondly, the interviews also revealed two different explanations for what originally motivated the participants to start playing games in the first place. Whereas the men all told stories of starting to play *WoW* because of an interest in the game itself, the women’s motivations were quite different. Forty-year-old Sharon’s introduction to gaming was “playing with the children on their consoles. [...] I would play anything with my children.” Thirty-two-year-old Lykke told how she was introduced to computer games by her “ex ... he was a system administrator so he had to sit by a computer 24 hours a day... So I might as well do that also, so he bought me *Neverwinter Nights* and from that moment on, I was sold.”

Twenty-one-year-old Line echoes this when she tells of her introduction:

Well, I used to think it was a shitty game. I had been living with Morten for quite some time and he sat out there and I sat in here in front of the TV. Sometimes I’d go out to him and look at his computer screen and I had *no* clue what was going on. And when we had Thomas and Lykke over for dinner, they all talked about the game and I was not in on the conversations and still had no idea what was going on. [...] So I started to play.

These quotes highlight the fact that the women started to play computer games not because of the games themselves, but in order to spend time with their children, a husband or a boyfriend. Despite the fact that games function fundamentally differently from other media, owing to the complex levels of interaction between player and game (what is normally termed “game play”), games are also social devices. Bird has argued that we need to study the role of media in our culture by focusing on how media outlets are embedded in everyday communicative and cultural practices (Bird 2003) and, in following her, I view gaming as a social practice that extends well beyond the actual moment of game play. As such, it is both inclusive and exclusive, and in order to be included, the women started playing the game, either with or alongside their partner, who in turn helps out with the difficulties the women encounter in relation to gaming. This is yet another instance of gaming capital in use: one person with gaming capital teaches another while at the same time maintaining a relationship. Here, playing the game and using the game console or the PC functions as a technology in the overall, socially organised practice of doing “parenthood”, as with Sharon, or the practice of doing “relationship”, as Lykke’s and Line’s introduction to gaming demonstrates.

If we shift our focus from the women's descriptions of gaming to the couples' gaming practices, we find a number of similar coping strategies. In her chapter "Playing Along", Malin Sveningsson explores how female *WoW* gamers adopt different coping strategies for handling situations of being within the male-dominated online gaming context of the game (Sveningsson 2012). The examples discussed here show how such coping strategies are by no means isolated to in-game contexts, but extend to out-of-game practices of organising gaming as a social practice. Using gaming as a social practice is a means of spending time together and the physical gaming set-up of the couple's computers reflects this. They had placed their computers so that they sat side by side, next to each other. These arrangements highlight the importance of including both the material structures and social interactions in the analysis of a practice because these set-ups allowed the couples to be together, both in-game and physically out-of-game, as the following conversation shows:

Lykke: "My parents have asked me why Thomas and I didn't spend more time together, watching TV or something..."

Line: "But, it's the same thing!"

Morten: "Yes, it is"

Lykke: "It *is* the same! Whether we are sitting on the couch watching TV or we sit next to each other at our computers – I can't see what the difference is."

Line: "Well, apart from the fact that we can't hold hands while gaming..."

As the women started to play together with their partners, the game itself became an activity they shared, something they did together. Despite the fact that playing a game and watching television require quite different skill sets, the couples came to understand the two different media uses as similar because of their social function. Here, mediated and non-mediated interactions intertwine as the couples engage in and perform two simultaneous, socially organised practices: gaming and relationships. Both their *doings* (how the couples created set-ups that allowed them to do things together both in-game and physically out-of-game), and their *sayings* (how they explicitly articulate, compare and understand their co-gaming practices similar to sitting together on the couch and watching TV together), reflect this. The computer has created a new possibility for situations of "togetherness" that draw on some of the same elements, understandings and engagements as other media-related practices.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored gaming expertise as a socio-material relation through a practice-based approach. The first perspective highlights how expertise is a relational quality and how games and gaming are always already inherently and materially gendered as a *dominant technicity*, "offering a particular masculine identity a valuable cultural space in which to create imaginary, controlled worlds" (Dovey & Kennedy 2006: 75-76). Gaming as a specific activity takes place within and forms part of a culture that is not gender neutral. Gendered structures of inclusion and exclusion are at work in the mediation of access to both games and play in a number of different ways. This is not a

focus on the technology as such, but rather the approach or attitudes towards technology, the discursive framing of it and how this slots into the construction of a gaming identity and intersects with domestic power relations.

All the women quoted in this article constructed both the normative user, the technology and the computer game as gendered male through positions of exclusion. They articulated a feminine position of technological incompetence as a particular kind of gendered femininity, which seemed to actively exclude technology itself and any kind of digital gaming expertise. When addressing why they *did* play, the motivations and engagements offered by the women were framed by negotiations of what kind of gaming expertise and technological competence is admissible and what kind is deemed inadmissible and geeky. If the first move the women made was towards a position of exclusion based on simplified gender, then the second move was a positioning and a careful negotiation in reference to the social. This was highlighted by the practice-based approach, which has highlighted the sorts of things people are regularly doing with media, amid the proliferating complexity of digital media and everyday life. Adopting such an approach in relation to gaming has highlighted the interconnectivity of the use of technologies involved in media consumption as it moves away from understanding gaming expertise as a fixed type to reframing gaming as continuous, relational activities in multiple, intersecting everyday life practices. We have seen how changes in specific kinds of media consumption have allowed for new types of sociality, new possibilities of doing “togetherness”, and new forms of practices emerging from the activities and elements of older, earlier practices. This can be viewed as the women’s negotiated way of engaging with and expressing digital expertise by means of connecting it to the social aspects of gaming. Gaming is “allowed” due to the social functions it supports, and these functions are important facets of “feminine cultural capital” (Skeggs 1997: 72). In making such a move, the women’s engagement is articulated not in the technology and gaming in itself, but rather in the social scenarios and the social function of the games and gaming. Regarded through these lenses, the notion of digital gaming expertise has to be approached in such a way that it recalls the material construction of technology as always already gendered.

Notes

1. Massively multiplayer online games are games capable of supporting large numbers of players interacting, competing and cooperating, as they simultaneously inhabit the persistent open world of the game space.
2. A guild is an in-game association of players, formed to make group activities easier and more rewarding, as well as to create a social atmosphere in which to enjoy the game. Membership in a guild offers players admission into a broader social network.
3. A PvE server (Player versus Environment) is a type of server that facilitates a style of play, where the player-controlled characters compete against the game world and its computer-controlled denizens – as opposed to Player-versus-Player (PvP) servers, where players fight other players. PvE is the dominant form of MMORPG games.

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