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Abstract

This article explores gendered practices in new media formations. We consider the ways that emergent practices in new media bring to the fore and make more explicit some previously submerged practices. In identity construction, in spatial practices, and in the productive labor of users of new media, we see examples of how the fluidity of gender can be highlighted, the cultural specificity of some often taken for granted and naturalized practices can be more readily understood as constructed, and ironically, how the overt and self-congratulatory crowing of some gamer and geek cultures draws attention to their misogyny, creating a much bigger and more easily identifiable target for counterstrategies. The intersection of emergent technologies and sociocultural practices creates new areas of gendered negotiations.

Keywords

gender, new media, labor, identity, mobile media, spatial practices

In 2011 and 2012, we witnessed a number of displays of mass misogyny online that make us stop and think about the power of mob mentality in online environments. Anita Sarkeesian put up a project for funding on the crowdfunding site Kickstarter. She wanted to make a short film about the ways in which women are represented in digital games. A howling pack of infuriated male gamers turned the full force of their hatred on her, attacking and hacking her personal websites, social media profiles, Wikipedia entries, and more. They sent hate messages including threats of rape and death. They reported her to various site administrators in an effort to have her material

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taken down (Sarkeesian 2012). In 2012, Adria Richards was subjected to a similar display of misogynistic hate of a very public nature, again, for calling to account sexist behavior on the part of some fellow technology workers at a conference (Marwick 2013). Marwick's piece in *Wired* carefully analyzes the discourses (including the burgeoning discourse of "misandry") used by men in the technology industry when responding to suggestions that they may be behaving unacceptably. Ironically in the hundreds of comments that follow her piece, a very nicely worked example of exactly what she was talking about is delivered by reactionary respondents.

It is tempting to suggest that the networked mass sites that allow the uncontrolled flow of communication between so many people are responsible, at least in part, for the unleashing of a ramped-up form of sexism via a new mob mentality. But the simplifications of technological determinism always miss the social power relations that are prior to and circulating through multiple cultural institutions. A more complex take, such as the one Marwick supplies, accounts for the privileges of class and education as well as race and gender found in the population of technology workers in question. Perhaps the new media amplify existing cultural attitudes and perhaps new media make more explicit what is sometimes veiled and difficult to reveal. Who ultimately "won" the Anita Sarkeesian battle? Her own analysis of the way a group of men turned harassing her into a game, where she was the "enemy" that they strategically marshaled their resources against, suggests that they were out to "win" by silencing her. In the end, Anita Sarkeesian attracted twenty-five times the amount of funding she was seeking, and will be able to make thirteen short films and employ herself full-time on the project. This support stands as a counter to the damage they inflicted. Despite Sarkeesian's triumph, ultimately, as Marwick suggests, the outcome of a massive hate attack may be to silence other women who are thinking of speaking out against oppressive and sexist behavior. Who wants to pay that price?

boyd (2012) points out that technology can be used as a tool and a weapon. But we should consider that the technological tools are still mostly in the hands of the men. Hacking is predominantly a male sport as far as we can tell. The language of hacking is computer code, and as long as the gender imbalance in computer programming persists, with mostly men in charge of the tools, the probability of misogynist hate campaigns remains high. It is a nonvirtuous cycle. However, the sociopolitical tools at hand are more evenly spread and the tactics and strategies developed by people against such attacks are just as important and may ultimately prevail. The governance of online spaces is still an emerging process.

In this article, we want to interrogate some of the ways in which new media intersect with gendered practices. We explore the ways that emergent practices in new media can highlight, or make more explicit, some previously submerged practices. In identity construction, in spatial practices, and in the productive labor of users of new media, we can see examples of how, for instance, the fluidity of gender can be highlighted, the cultural specificity of some often taken for granted and naturalized practices can be more readily understood as constructed, and the misogyny of some gamer and geek cultures, in their blatant and self-congratulatory crowing, create a much bigger, and more easily identifiable target for counterstrategies.

Interactive Media and Gendered Power Relations

Scholarship on gender and media has developed over the past forty years and broadened its focus from analyses of gender representation to complex explorations of audiences, production contexts, and their interactions. Keeping alert to the ways in which gender and gendered power relations manifest through media cycles, the advent of digital, interactive, networked, and mobile media changes the nature and increases the complexity of what we study. There is now considerable interest in the distributed nature of textual production by professionals and “audiences”/amateurs, where practices of representation and self-representation intersect and collide. We are interested in audiences as small as one and as vast as the global reach of networked technologies. Many conventions of mass media that appeared to be reasonably settled have been disrupted and we need to interrogate the ways in which gender and gendered power relations are played out in the new practices of networked media.

In amongst the hyperbole and pessimism about the possibilities of cultural transformation through “new media,” we have of course found that technological determinism, as a means of understanding change both past and future, will usually fail us. Culture (and its baggage of gendered inequality) reasserts itself as much in the new sociotechnical assemblages as in the old, but differently. Understanding the practices around new media is critical to understanding how power operates in them and through them.

When media were predominantly mass distributed, one-to-many forms, talking back to the producer or communicating with other audience members or representing oneself, were highly constrained activities. The social norms of gender were produced and reproduced by the gendered practices within media organizations. The distributed model of communication and interactive exchange exemplified by nonbroadcast online media signals a power shift that promises to decenter representational practices. Distributed, interactive media create opportunities and spaces for people to communicate with each other and to represent themselves in the same forms as those used by media organizations. New media practices offer different affordances for the *performance* of gender, rather than, or as well as, the *representation* of gender by someone else. This inevitably leads to a greater diversity in gender performance and its representation. And the interactivity leads to the situations discussed above, where there are examples of rampant sexism alongside every encouraging sign of change in gender power relations. The mechanisms of control are still being struggled over and the institutional forms are still unsettled and open to dispute.

One of the key affordances of interactivity is increased opportunity for agency and participation. A growing understanding of audiences as producers aligns well with a similar shift in thinking about gender as something we *have*, to gender as something we *do*. Adopting a view that gender is less fixed, more fluid, and actively constructed, we come to understand subjectivity as social, discursive, and intersubjective. Gender is never done in isolation. The shift in media distribution patterns from one-to-many to many-to-many begins to highlight the discursive and intersubjective constitution of

identity. In their give and take, interactive environments highlight the complex layering and dynamic social practices of gender.

Identity

At an important point in the history of media studies, spectatorial identity became entwined with identification. Our relationship with media narrative was characterized as one in which spectators identified with screen characters and had to negotiate the ever-present male gaze in the process. Masculine and feminine were aligned with fixed positions of power relative to the means of production. Later a view took hold that we asserted our identity through our taste in media. And more recently, that identity is negotiated through our collective interpretations of popular media texts that act as catalysts for our thinking and expression. We see all of these schools of thought, to greater and lesser extent, operating in and through distributed interactive media practices. And, as content is mobilized across platforms, the process of remediation from old to new is clear. Interactivity in itself has not significantly changed gendered practices of representation nor completely overturned historic relationships between gender, class, and power, yet subtle but notable changes are evident.

The process of remediation does not slavishly replicate previous forms but eventually gives rise to new forms. For instance, many interactive media move beyond strictly linear narrative forms as a variety of communicative acts intervene, interrupt, and corrupt nascent linear paths. A Facebook page is not a narrative in any conventional sense. It has narrative elements, but is better characterized by other features. It demonstrates rich interplay between individuals operating in a network, representing and regulating exchanges, exerting peer pressure, taking pleasure and fun in performance, and constructing their identities in dynamic ways that respond to social norming, sometimes with compliance and sometimes through resistance. The examples in the opening paragraphs of this article are the extreme form of processes that are taking place through all the banal, everyday interactions transacted across social media platforms between users. Perhaps it is in the microprocesses (as Foucault suggested) that we can find the new regulatory projects emerging. Marwick's identification of the "microaggressions" of tech industry men suggests that we can identify other, more positive, micro actions.

Drawing on Goffman's (1974) frame theory, we can understand that a person playing an online multiplayer game, for instance, simultaneously occupies several distinct but related roles: the off-line, embodied person; the online player; and the in-game character (Pargman and Jakobssen 2008). This collective identity can give rise to a highly dynamic gender performance (e.g., a masculine off-line identity, a more feminine player identity, and a feminine character in-game). An individual may perform a different type of gender in each frame, either by choice or through external pressures, constraints, and rewards. This experience highlights what Judith Butler described as the "indeterminacy" of gender when she called upon feminists to think more positively about the connotations of trouble. Writing in 1990, a short time after the swell of the first wave of graphical user interfaces in 1984–85 and prior to the wave breaking with

Mosaic (1992) and Windows 95, Butler did not predict the good trouble the Internet would bring but we find powerful resonances in the troubling questions she raised.

Butler's (1990, 34) project in *Gender Trouble* was to

think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexual power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity.

We suggest that the trouble we get into when we play with gender online is enhancing our ability to accept and respond to more ambiguous performances of gender in others and ourselves.

The performance of gender in an MMOG (massively multiplayer online game) is constrained by the game's particular representational scheme. While some of us may be used to wearing clothes and adopting particular styles that do not feel very consonant with our own sense of ourselves, the avatar that one dons in a game may offer not only a constraint of a similar nature (the stereotypical representations of male and female characters in games being ubiquitous and hard to escape) but also an opportunity to explore an alternate representation. The experience of performing a gendered subjectivity through a representation (or avatar) that may not align with any of a person's own understandings of themselves is an interesting proposition. Anonymity and play can allow experimentation and exploration of otherwise unavailable aspects of gender. Perhaps the "serious play" that Butler (1990, viii–ix) says feminism requires can be found in online games and in the opportunities for shifting identity that games provide, where we might also locate political possibilities for radical critique.

Experimentation and play do not, however, signal the disappearance of gender, nor of gender inequality. Anyone who has played in an online gaming environment knows that the policing of gender norms is intense. But the persistence of ambiguity as a player moves between, across, and among different performances as embodied self, player self, and character self offers a possibility of change. The character a person performs inside a game may be policed into a particular gender performance, but the alignment of character gender and player gender is not guaranteed and may not correspond. Every player who plays with people whom they have not met plays with the possibility that their fellow players may perform a different gender identity off-line. Living with such uncertainty and ambiguity over time offers the possibility of understanding gender as less fixed, and less anchored in the body, without denying the existence of norms and their reinforcement through discourse (Butler 1990, 99). If we conceive of other players in MMOGs as interactive audience for our performances of gender, then we ought also to think about their reactions and interactions as co-constitutive of our gender identities. Performances are adapted to responses and feedback in the context of intersubjective exchange.

Our simultaneous presence in a variety of spaces/places allows us to move between frames and perform gender differently in each, with sensitivity to context. Exploring

the ways in which gender and gendered power relations play out in new media environments leads to questions about our understanding of the spatial and the importance of space and location in relation to gender.

Space and Place

Camera phone practices offer an example of how copresence informs the performance of gendered identity across spaces and places. While the MMOG offers a chance to think about a static person occupying a number of spaces simultaneously through the computer interface, mobile phones add complexity to this by allowing the user to move through spaces and places in their embodied form as well. With this device of convergence, miniature, mobile, and at hand, we find opportunities to engage synchronously with others in multiple spaces, online and off-line simultaneously. Through mobile devices, visual imagery is being used to bridge spatial divides and overcome dislocation. In reframing space through the camera's lens and augmenting the traditional camera functions of archiving and memorializing space and place, we use images as key communicative interactions that eschew the indexical for the expressive. The camera's function as interface in such exchanges brings to mind the description of life at the interface that Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 1990) explores in her reflections on identity as lesbian/*mestiza*/borderland dweller.

Anzaldúa's (1987) new *mestiza* has a "tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" and marshals that ambiguity to create a new identity. For Anzaldúa (1987, 64), the simultaneous acts of "being seen, held immobilized by a glance, and 'seeing through' an experience" allow the movement through fixed consciousness to a hybrid subjectivity formed through multiple and mobile identities.

Camera phone practices are generating new spatial practices and ways of understanding the interactions of place and mobility in everyday life. The dynamic practices of gender are clearly exemplified through these new configurations of space, place, presence, mobility, and the everyday. New spatial practices facilitated by media interactions may generate new experiences of identity and of gender in ways similar to those that Anzaldúa evoked. In the introduction to *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, Anzaldúa (1990, xv) explains,

"Face" is the surface of the body that is the most noticeably inscribed by social structures, marked with instructions on how to be *mujer*, *macho*, working class, *Chicana*. As *mestizas*—biologically and/or culturally mixed—we have different surfaces for each aspect of identity, each inscribed by a particular subculture.

Over this surface, she continues with her metaphor, the *mestiza* might also wear a mask for protection. Between faces, surfaces, and masks are "interfaces" and "it is the place—the interface—between the masks that provides the space from which we can thrust out and crack the masks" (Anzaldúa 1990, xv–xvi). Through writing that rejects the androcentric, white, western paradigm, Anzaldúa (1990, xvi) and her sisters were "uncovering the inter-faces, the very spaces and places where our multiple-surfaced,

colored, racially gendered bodies intersect and interconnect.” The camera phone is an interface that provides a place and a set of spatial practices that allow us to break out and to connect and reconnect across what Anzaldúa (1990, 145) would characterize as the “permanent boundaries of a fixed self.”

Emerging possibilities for self-representation suggest an empowered position for women when compared with previous media such as television and print. The tools of production, so often denied women, are now within reach and relatively easy to use. Women can self-publish, self-represent, and have a voice in the public sphere. However, the increased surveillance, especially with location-based services (LBS) that track and sometimes publicize an individual’s location, creates a set of constraints on expression and performance. Sexting, for example, is a practice of self-expression and a possibly dangerous and indelible exposure. Many of the practices that women execute continue to place them in the spotlight “to be looked at”—for some a very pleasurable experience. New media, despite their different potentials, are still used in terms that replicate gender inequality and gendered social practices.

LBS in conjunction with practices of data collection and aggregation, distribution to unknown third parties, mining through a range of algorithms whose values and goals are opaque and inaccessible, can lead to a loss of privacy that may create significant vulnerabilities for women. Exposure can equal unwanted attention. But, women have spent centuries developing self-protective strategies, and continue to do so within new media environments. Thus, as Hjorth (in this issue) points out, young South Korean women have shifted away from the practice of “Selca” (taking photos of themselves in various places) and instead take pictures of the food they are eating as a signal about place without revealing what they look like. Such self-protective acts are quite sensible because they allow safe sharing of the rhythms of everyday life through globalized networks.

Globalized networked media highlight what was already clear from broadcast media—that different cultures interpret and use media in ways that very specifically accord with their own social structures and practices. The intersection of gender and place needs to be thought of as contingent on cultural context. Thus, the meanings and acceptability of peer-to-peer surveillance or of commercial surveillance vary from country to country and we can understand this as a form of localization. For instance, young South Korean women use their camera phones with links to phone and Internet platforms in particular ways while young American or Finnish women may use them differently, due to a range of factors, including culturally based communication practices, market pricing incentives and disincentives, and government regulations around data collection, storage, and its use.

Take-up of franchised products (games) in different countries also points to some of the ways in which localization occurs in globalized networked environments. User-generated content can create a trail marking the ways in which users respond to products differently. In a product like the *Sims*, where players can create in-game objects, and where conspicuous consumption and accumulation are key to success, the kinds of items players make leave many clues as to the taste cultures and aspirations of users. Such player-produced, localized content is inevitably culturally inflected and

gendered, and can highlight the construction of national identity as it intersects with gender and class in a globalized environment where marking self and other may have multiple dimensions.

The *Sims* play can also be seen as a comfortable fit with normative notions of women's leisure in that play is often productive rather than consumptive. Time is spent making something rather than time being "wasted" in nonproductive gameplay. It is also an expression of knowledge based in consumerism and practices of taste culture. Knowing which painting to adorn your *Sims* home with and making that skin is not only productive play but also expresses taste culture and associated class links.

The *Sims* franchise is a game that has been characterized as a "girl's" game or a game that women play. The productivity of women who play the game as they direct their energies to skinning and modding in-game objects could perhaps be viewed as a feminized form of hacking. Sanctioned, productive, and creative, yet within the safe boundaries of the game, the tools are benign, as are the outcomes. Very few transfer those skills into hacking the game code. While hacking game code is a valorized pastime among (mostly) male geek gamers, the *Sims* seems to offer up the active yet constrained alternative for women.

Labor

Whereas for media such as movies, television, and books, the task of localization fell to commercial companies, in online environments, we can see from the *Sims* example, some of this localization has been left to the users. It is part of a much broader trend. Ready access to easily used tools and low barriers to online publishing have generated extraordinary activity among online media "audiences." Over the past fifteen years, the ability of users to produce material and publish it has been cast as a liberating tool offering not only personal opportunities but also collaborative and social opportunities for "intercreativity" (Berners-Lee 1999; Meikle 2002; Spurgeon 2008). But these opportunities have also been contrasted with the vexed question of labor under neoliberal regimes. Can the activity of users also be cast as free labor harnessed by commercial enterprises, and does this constitute exploitation? Should a game wiki be viewed as the outsourcing of documentation by game developers to players? Does the production of mods, skins, and user interfaces for games constitute the outsourcing of artwork? In some games, it very explicitly *does* (the *Sims* series and *Spore* from Maxis studio are good examples).

Discussions of immaterial labor in the online realms have been extensive and yet many of them have failed to pick up on all the work done by feminists in understanding the role of women's work under capitalism and the very useful frameworks feminists have generated already for thinking about immaterial labor. Social reproduction has been theorized and used to account for women's labor and its relation to exchange markets and yet, despite the implication that the digital labor of productive users is feminized (precarious, underpaid or unpaid, affective, etc.), few of the major theorists critically engage with the work of feminist labor theorists. Not only have feminist labor theorists worked to understand the value of unpaid women's work but they have

often worked with the concept of affect and its value. They have made it clearly possible to understand the articulation between various forms of paid and unpaid work and their affective components and outline their exploitative aspects without losing sight of the value of affect that exceeds monetary exchange.

Moreover, an understanding of the social reproduction of labor in which the affective interactions also work to reproduce social norms is a useful way to frame the willingness of digital users to engage so readily in their productive labors. Rather than the imposition of some top-down authority that forces people to “work for free,” the peer-to-peer norming of productive behaviors online demonstrates the ways in which user agency can simultaneously reproduce exploitative relations and produce pleasure. These ideas are key to the first article in this collection, where Kylie Jarrett carefully articulates the ways in which feminist labor theory can frame and explain the affective intersections with commercial exchange that are at the heart of so much productive activity within social media.

Conclusion

There is a wealth of well-established feminist theory available and useful to media scholars for thinking through the questions posed by new media. Imagining change through representational forms and thinking about possible futures through those forms is as old as the Palaeolithic cave paintings. The work of feminist archaeologist Margaret Conkey has been key to overturning androcentric archaeological interpretation of such paintings. Food remains found at the Altamira Caves were of a much wider variety than what was depicted on the cave walls and thus the production context of the cave paintings was signaling a greater range of meaning for the images than a simple declaration of what was hunted and eaten there (Conkey 1980). Conkey has explained that the images of animals painted on the cave walls did not necessarily represent what was “good to eat” but rather what was “good to think.” Many of our new media practices are about thinking through contemporary challenges and imagining options and actions for culture change.

Interactive media—blogs, games, social networking platforms, and mobile phones—extend our practices of gendered relations into new representational and performative forms, all the while producing and reproducing the existing social norms of gender. But incrementally, in the banality of the quotidian practices of user interactions, we may identify change. There are disruptions to established patterns. The fluidity of gender as a construction may be more explicit in some environments. The threats to the status quo may be met with more explicit and sometimes vicious (and even visible) backlash. The dynamism of gender performance is brought to the surface by the demands to adapt to the new challenges of media formations. The work of gender production is taken up over and over through interactive practices that vary in form, but may only marginally (if at all) effect a challenge to dominant gendered norms. Emergent possibilities exist alongside constraints.

Each article in this collection examines an aspect of gender and new media or games as touched upon in this introductory article. Kylie Jarrett’s thought-provoking

piece puts feminist thought front and center to consider the political economy of new media. Carol Stabile's contribution on gender accountability in MMOGs maps out the ways in which gender performance is created intersubjectively through player practices and explores the possibilities for subversion and change to emerge from the very culture that also spawned the anti-Sarkeesian rampage. Larissa Hjorth's article examines the camera phone practices of young South Korean women, analyzing the intersections of LBS, gender, mobility, and surveillance. She deftly draws out the spatialized and gendered social practices developing the South Korean context. In a very different case of localization, Hanna Wirman describes the practices of Finnish women who create skins for the *Sims*, pointing to the relations among national culture, taste cultures, and knowledge, including consumer knowledge, as they are articulated through skinning. Rounding out the collection is Maureen Ryan's well-crafted analysis of design blog *Apartment Therapy*, which explores taste culture as it intersects with expressions of gender, class, and location.

This collection of articles represents a selection of papers delivered at the 2011 Console-ing Passions conference in Adelaide, South Australia. This long-running conference on feminism and media was established to provide a platform for the developing field of feminist television studies, moving it from the margins of media studies to the center. Console-ing Passions continues to be a receptive environment for new feminist scholarship, new media scholarship, and the points at which they converge. With this collection, we feature only a small selection of the dynamic feminist thought that marked the memorable 2011 conference. The editors wish to acknowledge their former colleague and Console-ing Passions board member, Jackie Cook, without whom the conference would not have been possible.

Authors' Note

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1. *Mestiza* is a Latin American term of identity to refer to a mixed European and indigenous heritage.

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