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 researchers 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 researchers 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 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 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

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.
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.

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