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Chapter Proposal for Digital Rhetoric and Global Literacies: Communication Modes and Digital Practices in the Networked World

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**Proposed title:** Gender-Inclusivity Framework (GIF): Enriching the Rhetoric of Gender Play in Games

**Author:** Roziana Ibrahim, PhD

**Abstract (129 words)**

Gender inclusivity in games is still exploratory and, despite an increase in games and gender research, many challenges remain in designing a more gender-inclusive game. This chapter addresses the problem of how to support gender inclusivity in games by combining theories in games and gender. Existing research in games and gender tend to focus on finding out how each gender plays and their preferences in games. However, there is little evidence that researchers have approached the issue of gender inclusivity in games with the intent of building a cohesive understanding of gender inclusivity in games and the relationships that exist between the different dimensions and components. Consequently, the aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of how the digital rhetoric for gender-inclusivity in games can be supported.

**Keywords:**

Gender inclusive, gender inclusivity, game design, game framework

**Introduction**

Gender-inclusivity is still a new concept in the games industry and existing assumptions about games and gamers usually associate gaming and electronic gadgets with the male gender and as masculine activities. However, recent market studies have shown that women have a large share of the games and consumer electronics market (ESA, 2010; Mazel, 2011). Although market data showed there is a dramatic change in gamers demography, whereby female gamers represent 33% of the gamer's population and 40% are female gamers over the age of 18, large commercial and popular games are still designed and marketed for the male gamers as the main audience.

While the girl games movement seems to present an answer to the male-focused games with the emergence of *pink* games such as *Barbie Fashion Designer*, *Wedding Dash* and *Disney Princess*, these games portrayed a stereotypical female sex role and their focus on female-pinkness has created a niche market which may have exclude gamers that do not identify with a particular sex role or simply dislike the colour pink. The implications from these situations highlight the need to consider gender nuances during games design; specifically, what female gamers really want from their games.

**Background**

We will explore the trends in consumer electronics industry and games industry; in particular, how product designs is reflecting the major shift of its consumers' demography and economic powerhouse. This section will demonstrate how women are becoming a major contributors to the household income, have the purchasing power, are internet savvy and, have large networks both offline and online. Specifically for a gamer demography, this is a change from the common assumption that a gamer has to be male between the ages of 18 to 34 and must be technically savvy. One of the implications of these trends is that it is not enough just knowing what women want but to fully understand the intricacies. Consequently, it is a misguided assumption that all female likes things in pink, fluffy and sparkles.

Next, we will demonstrate that large commercial and popular games are still being designed for the male audience; a survey of games winning Game of the Year awards from AIAS within a 10-year period (from 2000 to 2011) showed that a majority of games that won the award were from action-thriller-shooting genres,

i.e. *Diablo 2*, *Halo: Combat Evolved*, *Half-Life 2*, *God of War*, *Gears of War*, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and *Mass Effect 2* and a similar trend can be seen in this year's BAFTA award winners, *Mass Effect 2* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops*. Hence, when Activision, developer of the *Call of Duty* game series and other popular games such as *Guitar Hero*, *World of Warcraft*, *Spider-Man* and *Crash Bandit*, claimed that having a female protagonist would not increase the sales of a game title (Alexander, 2010), it does not come as a surprise.

In contrast, the girl game movement rocketed to success in 1997, when Mattel Interactive launched *Barbie Fashion Designer* and sold 600,000 units within the first year (Krotoski, 2004). Although there is still a demand for *pink games* such as *Powerpuff Girls*, *My Little Pony* and *Disney Princess* series (Kafai et al., 2008), this intense pink-ness and focusing on traditional feminine sex roles created a small niche market and may have excluded a larger gamer's market of male players, different age levels and even female gamers who do not like the colour pink.

### **Gender-Inclusivity Issues in Games**

There is existing research on game models, (Aarseth, 2007; Barwood & Falstein, 2006; Bjork et al., 2003; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Costikyan, 1994; Fullerton et al., 2004; Hunicke et al., 2001; Jarvinen, 2007; Konzack, 2002; Koster, 2005; Kreimeier, 2002; Rollings & Adams, 2003; Salen & Zimmerman, 2005) however; these game models rarely show how gender preferences can be accommodated during a game design process.

On a similar note, there are relevant findings concerning gender in games (Bonanno & Kommers, 2005; Bryce & Rutter, 2005; Carr, 2005; Flanagan, 2005; Gorriz & Medina, 2000; Hoeft et al., 2008; Jansz et al., 2010; Jenkins, 1998; Kafai, 1998; Laurel, 1998; Lewis, 1998; L. Miller et al., 1996; M. K. Miller & Summers, 2007; Ogletree & Drake, 2007; Pratchett, 2005; Roberts et al., 1999; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 1998; Turkle, 1986), but they are somewhat inconclusive.

Most previous research in games and gender highlights gender differences in games preferences focusing on a specific content, specific player and specific conditions. Thus, there is little emphasis on a coherent structure – no integrative framework to interpret or apply gender-inclusivity in games. Moreover, there is little attention given to conceptualise the structure of gender-inclusivity in games. We argue that these issues might hinder the creation of a more gender-inclusive game, as there is no mechanism to paint a whole picture of how these findings fit together, how widely they can be applied, or how and why they are limited. Consequently, it is critical to understand the ways to support digital rhetoric for designing gender-inclusivity in games.

### **Solutions and Recommendations: Gender-Inclusivity Framework (GIF)**

In this chapter, we present an integrative framework that draws on previous research, classifies and synthesises the digital rhetoric of gender-inclusivity in games. We argue that such a framework is an organising and unifying structure that accounts for gender-inclusivity in games. Such an integrative framework is timely because, within the game design field, there exists no single theoretical perspective that can support a common communication platform when considering gender-inclusivity in games. As initial analysis was unable to find evidence suggesting that a common set of terminology exists to describe gender-inclusivity in games, we hypothesise that a set of components for classifying gender inclusivity in games could form the groundwork for explicitly consolidating the subject into one reference point. Without a reference point it is very difficult to know what gender inclusivity in game even means, much less what gender inclusivity in games looks and feels like or to start designing one. In contrast, with a set of components to refer to, a designer can easily decide which component to include and design for a specific game.

Our emphasis will be on describing the Gender-Inclusivity Framework (GIF) as a mechanism that can be used to identify the dimensions and components of gender-inclusivity in games, and describe how these

components behave. We begin by outlining the advantages of an integrative framework approach to gender-inclusivity in games, with a focus on the contribution of such an approach to our understanding of gender-inclusivity in games. Then, we present a brief overview of the gender-inclusivity framework, and discuss its dimensions and components. The components describe the dimension in terms that can be measured and evaluated in empirical studies. Hence, the combination of dimensions and components used to construct the framework provides the description of gender inclusivity in games, which in turn is expected to predict the actual degree of gender inclusivity in games. More importantly, GIF can be used to define the development of a more gender-inclusive game, providing a description of each component, including its definition and behaviour. Without a detailed description of gender inclusivity in games, it would be difficult to design how the components would look and behave in a game. On the other hand, with a set of definitions and behaviour descriptions, more informed decisions can easily be made during the game creation process and therefore produce more accurate depiction of gender-inclusive components in games.

### **Future Trends and Conclusion**

While the framework provides new features and benefits to gender-inclusivity in games, this section presents a research plan with an overarching goal to help ensure that gender inclusivity in game solutions is developed systematically with scientific validation principles. The result of this plan will be a set of tools to improve approaches to gender inclusivity in games, made available to a wider community of academics and practitioners, and, in addition, for the tools to be adaptable to different domains such as web design, interactive multimedia and mobile applications. The chapter concludes with a summary, a balanced assessment of the contribution of gender-inclusivity framework in games, and a roadmap for future directions.

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