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Dear Videogames, Letter Writing and the Dear Ada Project

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Abstract

Dear Ada is a Feminists in Games supported project which invites members of the videogame community to submit letters on the subject of gender and games. Letter writing as part of a long feminist tradition of life writing is chronicled by Margaretta Jolly in *In Love and Struggle*, which spans generations of writers including letters between mothers and daughters, queer love letters, political movements and letters after the advent of email. This article reflects on the Dear Ada letters and how the project is situated within a larger feminist epistolary history.

Author Keywords

Feminism; games; letter writing; ethics of care

Introduction

Dear Ada is a Feminists in Games supported project which invites members of the videogame community to submit letters on the subject of gender and games. Letter writing as part of a long feminist tradition of life writing is chronicled by Margaretta Jolly in *In Love and Struggle*, which spans generations of writers including letters between mothers and daughters, queer love letters, political movements and letters after the advent of email. This article reflects on the Dear Ada letters and how the project is situated within a larger feminist epistolary history.

Around the turn into the 20th Century, there were many questions about women. One of them was “Why aren’t there many women writers?” The typical answers ranged from men’s predisposition to artistic ability to women being too fragile and unintelligent to push through the rigor needed to be a writer. Writers are usually men, in a male artistic culture, and that’s just how it was; any woman who became notable was seen as performing something masculine. (Mattie Brice)

So begins a “Dear Ada” letter written by Mattie Brice. Although we see the scarcity of feminine literature at the turn of the century employed here as an analogue for the hegemonic culture of videogames, the fact remains that the issue of voice has not dated when it comes to the subject of gender and games. Feminine voices in videogames are still marginalized and even censured by the culture at large (Cixous, 1976; Busse, 2013; Coppa, 2006). Reporters trying to do their jobs are patronized by publisher representatives at conventions, writers harassed for gendering their opinions, and there are few feminine voices constructing game narratives and even fewer writing code. In fandom, players participating in the culture through ‘feminized’ modes of writing such as ‘fanfic’ – referring to “any prize retelling of stories and characters drawn from mass-media content” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 285) – are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy and deprived of cultural and gaming capital (Busse, 2013).

Francesca Coppa (2006) offers interesting insight as to why feminine voices, specifically the written word, are devalued in cultures such as gaming. She says that subcultural communities are hierarchical and that whilst they tend to support “traditional values that privilege the written word over the spoken one and mind over body” that as we move down the hierarchy there is “a shift from literary values (the mind, the word, the ‘original statement’) to what I would claim are theatrical ones (repetition, performance, embodied action)” (231). She concludes that “as we descend, we move further away from ‘text’ and more toward ‘body’” (231). At the bottom of the rung, therefore, sits writers who are not masculine and trying to use the dominant and thus masculine, language. Negatively charged feminine writing and actively feminist writers who want to discuss issues of gender and games then occupy a position from which it is very difficult to step up or be heard.

The Dear Ada project began as a personal letter correspondence between myself and Mitu Khandaker in an effort to try and carve out a private space to discuss our concerns regarding the gendered experience in games where we could not find one publicly. The dialogue provided a crucial sense of support as we worked through our issues, experiences and histories as women in the games community. Whilst we both desired that the discussions would empower affirmative action or yield some magic solution to an overwhelming amount of problems identified in our narratives, what we found instead was that the exercise of writing these letters was an extremely valuable step in itself. As a response to this personal and productive dialogue, we created Dearada.com, which invites others to join in the discussion by writing letters addressed to Ada Lovelace. The site is intended as a safe space – providing anonymity for those who require it – for feminine voices to express themselves, share their thoughts on gender and games or document their experiences through the feminist tradition of letter writing. This article reflects on the Dear Ada project and serves as a rationale, providing a contextual history of feminine epistolary form. By referring to the content of letters submitted to the project, this discussion demonstrates how the life-writing practice of letter correspondence constitutes a feminist intervention in games culture.

You’ve Got Mail

Letter writing as a long feminist tradition is chronicled by Margareta Jolly in *In Love and Struggle*. Jolly documents the proto-genre of letter writing as a pre-feminist female social practice amongst Victorian women and conceptualizes dialogues between mothers and daughters, letters exchanged between lesbian lovers, second wave political correspondence networks as well as email and other digital communications. There are two important features to letters which lead Jolly to champion the form as a feminine (and feminist) practice. Firstly, as a type of life-writing, letters allow women to be agents in their own narratives, and

secondly, the dialogic nature of letters means that they are mediums for developing and maintaining feminine relationships because the writing can be personal and avoid masculine gazes. The subjectivity and expression afforded in letters represents a shift in feminine writing. Mary Mason, for example, has argued “that women have historically told their stories through writing about the lives of others or a significant other, in opposition to the canonical traditions of men’s tales of public achievement and as exceptional individuals” (in Jolly, 2008, p. 81). Life-writing puts the writer at the centre of the narrative whilst the letter, as an exchange, also involves the ‘ethics of care.’ The ethics of care refers to the emotional labour that is present in all dynamics of feminine relationships managed through letters. For Jolly (2008), the sociality of letters also serve feminine interests for, as she writes regarding the same period of time as Brice, a moment of low transparency for feminine literature: “epistolary networks [are] a female world of love and ritual” which challenge the “existing assumptions that women were merely oppressed by Victorian gender segregation” (p. 9). She concludes that letters from this time “show that women were involved in loving, indeed passionate relationships with one another throughout their lives” (p. 9). According to Jolly, offering support and understanding and the airing of differences and strong disagreements are central to the bonds women build and break with one another through their letters. Summarizing the feminist affordances of letters, this genre of writing provides vital space for subjectivities whilst also being a social and emotional form of communication.

A section of Jolly’s work is also focused on the changing ethics of letters online. Engaging with cyberfeminist discourse, Jolly notes the affordances of anonymity in the virtual and how the advent of email and forums and social networks has “seduced people into life writing, into the pleasures and demands of composition to another” because digitally mediated conversation disrupts “the symbolism of power embedded in face-to-face communication” (p. 191). While skeptical of the more utopic aspect of cyberfeminism, Jolly does suggest that there are positive, feminist potentials to life writing in the digital: “email, along with related dialogic forms such as webcam or video, hypertext, faxes, and listservs, [are] far more receptive to feminine interests than the letter literatures of the past precisely because they are more interactive and performative” (p. 182).

Read Messages

Leafing, or more accurately, clicking, through the letters of the Dear Ada project, Jolly’s conception of the feminist virtues of life writing are apparent and the ethics of care felt, particularly in a popular format which we refer to internally as ‘origin stories.’ These types of letters detail a transforming moment when the writer discovered feminism or encountered prejudices that awakened them to the gender issues of games culture. Such letters consistently demonstrate feminist values in letter writing content and practice.

The thoughts and experiences shared on the site describe a broad spectrum of experiences and views on gender and games culture and speak to a variety of feminisms. Contributors to the site also represent numerous identity intersections in terms of race, sex, gender and sexuality. Industry representative White Mouse, for example, speaks anonymously about institutionalized bullying in the industry, while independent developer Mitu Khandaker remarks on her reticence to speak up for more diverse representation in her game design. Writer and educator Samantha Allen ruminates on intersectional identity issues, while designer Chelsea Howe recalls explicitly anti-feminist attitudes in her formative years, and I discuss the absence of feminine authority figures as a challenge in identifying with feminism.

Whilst each origin story is unique to the author, there are overlaps. Considering that they are, for the most part, open letters addressed to Ada and the Internet at large, writers respectfully respond to one another, directly and indirectly, by hyperlink or by empathetically engaging with the themes in other letters. One theme that came up frequently, though it was largely communicated outside of the public letters through emails and messages on social networking sites, was the difficulty in writing these letters. Some interested parties were not able to complete a letter at all. The weight of ‘life writing’ (Jolly, 2008), the personal and sometimes confessional type of writing which the letter form represents, should not be underestimated. The challenges of letter writing are addressed in the opening page of Jolly’s historiography as the author of a letter confesses to her struggle with writing her life because writing the truth to someone else was also admitting it to herself. This, however, was not the only challenge presented by life writing in the project; another issue was value related as authors expressed doubt regarding how productive their life writing could be to others. This resonates with a feminine hesitance to write themselves, observed by Helene Cixous’ (1976). She writes:

And why don’t you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven’t written. (And why I didn’t write before the age of twenty-seven). Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great – that is for “great men”; and it’s “silly.” Besides, you’ve written a little, but in secret. And it wasn’t good, because it was secret, because you punished yourself for writing it... (p. 876-877).

The emergence of this issue is also bound up in the ethics of care. Not only were side-communications taken up between writers (project founders included) to support one another and assuage fears, but the nature of the value related concerns about writing suggest a care ethic for the cause in the anxious writers, a desire for the writing to be not only good writing, but productive, conclusive, or at minimum, relatable. Whilst the individual wrestles with this issue, the collective writings of the project demonstrate such values unnecessary.

The recurrence of the origin story form is also interesting because this was not actively solicited by the call for participation. The emergence of a style in these letters suggests a desire for dialogue, a compassionate and passionate care ethic coursing through the bodies of writing as authors offer their experiences up to the greater narrative. The result is a growing exquisite corpse of the feminine experience in games culture and corresponding feminisms. The overall collection, as both connected and discrete, demonstrates an important post-essentialist feminist tenet which emphasizes “women’s differences from one another [and] the importance of each individual’s experience” (p. 119).

The emergence of dialogue in these open letters also calls to mind what Jolly refers to as ‘writing webs.’ She says that “the web is a symbol of how everything is connected and all things depend on one another” (p. 122) and refers to how analogue letter writing practices which are centred on a common theme or goal will collectively communicate a feminist narrative. In other words, letters written to a variety of individuals, politicians, newspapers or even open letters concerned with a specific subject are dialogic. To conclude this project report, I will follow Jolly’s thesis and briefly turn to content analysis and meditate on the type of feminism(s) for games that can be gleaned from the Dear Ada project.

Sent Messages

The feminisms expressed through the letters of the Dear Ada project are often expressed in explicitly ludic terms:

I thought that to “win” (as if it’s a zero-sum game – another masculine influence!) I would have to prioritize things I didn’t really value. These rude, uncooperative, self-centered behaviors and empty posturing. Male things. I would have to be something I was not... I didn’t *want* to learn how to win in a man’s world. I wanted to learn how to craft a world where women could succeed as themselves. I still do (Chelsea Howe).

Designer Chelsea Howe’s critique of the attitude expressed in industry culture is not only hyper-masculine but a masculinity that is reified in the games the industry produces. She says success is framed as ‘winning,’ it is goal oriented, game oriented. The specific zero-sum definition of game which Sheri Graner Ray (2004) says is gender exclusive because not only does winner imply a loser and but the attainment of a win condition is aggressively confrontation-based. According to Graner Ray (2004): “Research has shown that in the general population, males will chose to resolve conflict in a confrontational manner that results in a zero-sum outcome” and women are less directly competitive and confrontational. If this is the game that is played, feminine bodies less willing to play that way can be framed as the loser. Howe’s feminism exchanges the word or condition of ‘win’ for a different sort of play, the non-competitive, feminine and creative, ‘craft.’

The feminism which Howe describes reflects on systemic issues of a ludic approach by the hegemonic games community to its culture and alludes to a mode of intervention. This is rather compatible with an extract from Samantha Allen’s letter which draws a direct corollary between games and feminism. She says:

Games appeal to me for the same reasons feminist theory does: they both explore the interactions of systems and they both encourage creative solutions to challenging problems. As I unlocked new game worlds, learned new mechanics, and experienced new modes of interaction in my return to gaming, so too was I seeing my own social world with fresh eyes, learning theories about its operations and experimenting with new ways of inhabiting it” (Samantha Allen).

For Samantha, “gaming and feminism are forever entwined” and this seems to be the feminism of the Dear Ada letters, as the majority of the life writing involves realizations which are arrived at through experiences in the community or impact their impressions and participation in games cultures. That this would appear here in the form of ludic language or system-based thinking is not surprising, because we are, after all, all gamers.

Signing Off

The ethics of care are present in the tensions produced and represented in the life writing of this project. The individual narratives are emotional, they detail trying experiences and recount anxieties regarding the author’s position on feminist issues as well as ones position in game culture. Each individual experience deals with the emotional labour of the gendered

experience. The content of these letters are also considerate of one another, another aspect of the ethics of care. This is particularly evident in the empathetic responses between myself and Mitu, but deeply implied in many of the following letters which, to some degree, respond to the conversation we started. The difficulty in honestly, openly representing one's life through writing is a complicated part of the ethics of care because of the anxieties around reception of that writing. Empathy and acceptance of life narratives makes creating them a fraught experience (as we repeatedly encountered during the course of the project), but the weight of this type of writing extends to the receiver because the letter is dialogic. Returning life writing involves all the tensions of representing life narratives, coupled with the responsibilities of reply, whether writing to support or rebuke.

According to Jolly, the author, reader, respondent relationship embodies the emotional labour involved in the ethics of care as well as feminist history, specifically, in the transitions and disputes between first, second and third wave. The ethics of care is a code of communicative and collaborative conduct which is deeply lacking in populist game culture. Creating a space in which voices that yearn to communicate around feminist and gender issues in games with the confidence that their labours, in the form of penning personal experience and opinion, will be met with respect and empathy was the primary goal of Dear Ada. It is, therefore, promising to see this ethic emerging in the communications so far. As the project continues, we hope to emphasize more direct communication between life writers, inviting direct responses, with every effort of the ethics of care, to the life writing of women involved and in love with games.

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