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What Can the Digital Humanities Learn from Feminist Game Studies?

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Abstract

When game studies became an area for scholarly inquiry in the academy, feminist game studies soon followed. The first generation of feminist theory in game studies built on the work of Sherry Turkle, Brenda Laurel, and Janet Murray, although some might argue that the legacy of challenging gender norms in game studies goes back even earlier. Now feminist game scholars organize international conferences, edit journals and scholarly collections, and shape trends in the profession, much as their counterparts in the digital humanities attempt to do, but critics in feminist game studies have been able to take advantage of what is seen as a relatively long trajectory of feminist theoretical inquiry and field development. Articulating a need for a feminist corrective in the digital humanities has come at a much slower pace, perhaps because the instrumentalism of a "tool" seems much less blatantly anti-feminist than the instrumentalism of a gun. Furthermore, calls to action from more radicalized forms of feminist approaches to science and technology studies have been noticeably absent in the literature around digital information retrieval in the humanities. This issue of *DHQ* indicates that a sea change may finally be taking place.

1

When game studies became an area for scholarly inquiry in the academy, feminist game studies soon followed. After all, when so many videogames so obviously featured ejaculatory shooting, sexual conquest, objectified femininity, alienated labor, separation of the domestic and commercial spheres, physical domination, zero-sum negotiations, and waging mass warfare, the need for feminist responses to the aggression and opportunism represented in computer games might have seemed self-evident. The first generation of feminist theory in game studies built on the work of Sherry Turkle, Brenda Laurel, and Janet Murray, although some might argue that the legacy of challenging gender norms in game studies goes back at least to the countercultural subversion of the new games movement in the sixties and seventies or the work of the Situationists. Perhaps the correspondence between Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage about his mechanized tic-tac-toe game may point to an even long history of feminist engagement in algorithmic game culture. Now feminist game scholars organize international conferences, edit journals and scholarly collections, and shape trends in the profession, much as their counterparts in the digital humanities attempt to do, but critics in feminist game studies have been able to take advantage of what is seen as a relatively long trajectory of feminist theoretical inquiry and field development.

2

Articulating a need for a feminist corrective in the digital humanities has come at a much slower pace, perhaps because the instrumentalism of a "tool" seems much less blatantly anti-feminist than the instrumentalism of a gun. Furthermore, calls to action from more radicalized forms of feminist approaches to science and technology studies, epitomized by decades of work spanning from Donna Haraway to Kavita Philip, has been noticeably absent in the literature around digital information retrieval in the humanities. Tara McPherson has argued that the early humanities computing projects were actually characterized by reactionary tendencies to shun feminism, queer theory, and multiculturalism in the name of preserving great books and memorializing canonical authors in a neutral, technocratic archive divorced from the increasingly politicized campuses of the free speech era and the subsequent culture wars. Despite the fact that librarians and archivists have often been allies of the American cultural left, many early digital humanities initiatives seemed to aspire to be apolitical in their orientation. It could be argued that the digital humanities was also surprisingly slow to consider the implications of what Judy Wajcman calls "TechnoFeminism" by interrogating the masculinist ideologies of technology itself.

3

This issue of *DHQ* indicates that a sea change may finally be taking place. Recent high-profile blog posts by Bethany Nowviskie about gendered language at the heart of the NEH's "Digging into Data Challenge" and from Miriam Posner about brogrammer code culture that privileges literacies that exclude women have finally catalyzed more serious discussions about the possibilities of creating a field of feminist digital humanities. Amy Earhart and Julia Flanders remind the DH community that collections and archives from nascent women's studies departments often provided impetus for many early digital humanities projects. Rising scholars in the #transformDH movement are also bringing queer theory, transgender perspectives, and posthumanism into public discussions about inclusion and exclusion in DH.

4

But where would the field of Feminist DH locate its core values? How can it be more than simply anti-masculinist in its orientation? Criticizing the obvious fetishizing of tools, code, competition, and "massive" or "big" data projects is one thing. Doing field-building work is another. Furthermore, how would feminist DH be specifically feminist in its theoretical grounding rather than merely oriented toward improving access and equity for women in DH? What does it mean to rethink rule-based systems and user agency from a feminist perspective and then apply the worldview of feminist game studies to the work of the digital humanities? According to Carolyn Guertin, subjectivity under feminism "becomes a process and a performance that is constantly in a state of redefining its own complexity according to a network of power formations" (2009). What would it mean to move from a paradigm of tool development to a paradigm of process and performance in which the network of power formations moves from ground to figure?

5

Nina B. Huntemann defines feminist game studies as a field that focuses on "how gender, and its intersections with race, class, sexuality, etc., is produced, represented, consumed and practiced in and through digital games" (2012). Huntemann, like many feminist game

scholars, is also interested in the genealogies of computer games, and their origins in a computational media history shaped by military training, surveillance technologies, and the exercise of force by the power of the state [Huntemann and Payne 2010]. Feminist digital artists who deploy game technologies, as Anne-Marie Schleiner does in her *Counterstrike* intervention *Velvet-Strike* or Char Davies does by using 3D graphics with a head-mounted display in her immersive installations, may explicitly promote forms of user interaction that defy command-and-control tactics and subvert expectations that the user should obliterate obstacles and occupy territory. Although some scholars have pointed out how digital humanities projects borrow specific technologies of geospatial mapping developed for the user interface of flight simulators [Presner 2008], knowledge-sharing between the military and the digital humanities often still takes place without comment.

6

Feminist approaches to videogames and virtual worlds have included a range of approaches that explicitly borrow from feminist methodologies in ethnography, human-computer interaction, science and technology studies, media arts practice, and textual criticism. It is worth noting that many of these fields are now only beginning to be referenced in the scholarly literature of the digital humanities. Many current scholars of computer games and virtual worlds – such as Beth Coleman, Mary Flanagan, Tracy Fullerton, Celia Pearce, Emily Roxworthy, and Katie Salen – also identify as designers and bring their experiences as creative professionals with prototyping, workflow management, iteration, and user-testing to the field. Even if they don't identify as designers, many in feminist game studies identify strongly as players or power users of videogames. For example, Mia Consalvo, Lisbeth Klastrup, Bonnie Nardi, Carol Stabile, T.L. Taylor, and Jill Walker Rettberg have pursued advancement within in-game reputation systems, and their scholarly ethos as game scholars seems to be enhanced by having progressed from apprenticeship to mastery in particular games, as evidenced by their achievements, hours logged, and the fame of their avatar names.

7

Many debates in the digital humanities recall debates already rehearsed in game studies. For example, significant cohorts of digital designers, programmers, and architects must collaborate and compete with those who identify exclusively as critics and theorists within the research community. Questions about which group can speak with the most authority in public fora can be difficult to resolve, particularly when plainspoken discourse and highly technical skills prized by builders and makers are devalued by the academy. Much as DH purists have called for "more hack, less yack" or lionized "builders," designers of classic games are often the keynote speakers at game conferences and serve as celebrity attendees. However, it may be reasonable for digital humanities projects to also consider how certain power users intent on exploring collections for hours at a time can provide specialized input about system design, much as attention to "hardcore gamers" in game studies may provide insights about the co-creation of knowledge.

8

There are a number of useful insights to be gained in the digital humanities from observing how feminist game studies gained legitimacy in an environment devoted to machismo mastery and performance. Feminist game scholars have done important work on

protocols, market forces, technoculture, datification, instrumentalism, opportunism, and online aggression, as well as on appropriation, domesticity, reciprocity, collective agency, community building, and empathy. They have also successfully built networks, collectives, and collaboratives. However, feminist game studies also benefited from the fact that during the past three decades feminist scholarship transformed both science and technology studies and film and television studies. Feminist scholars of literacy, programming, and cultural studies including Anne Balsamo, Wendy Chun, Radhika Gajjala, N. Katherine Hayles, and Lisa Nakamura used critical frameworks that reconfigured ideas about bodies, machines, affect, and labor and applied analytic methods formerly reserved for art and literary texts to technological discourses, such as those around reproductive medicine or computer science. At the same time, the contributions of scholars such as Mary Anne Doane, Anne Friedberg, Linda Williams, Lisa Parks, Lisa Cartwright, and Teresa de Lauretis exerted a major influence on the field of media studies by shifting the focus of critical practice from text and discourse to matters of the apparatus, technosocial environments, embodied experiences, and the interfaces and platforms of mediation.

9

Obviously, to take game studies seriously in the digital humanities presents a number of disciplinary, methodological, and practical problems. Game studies scholars often situate themselves as participant-observers rather than disinterested critics or archivists and reject poses of depersonalized neutrality. Game interfaces are characterized by the intentional frustration of easy user access by the game's designers. In contrast, interfaces for digital humanities projects – search engine portals, hyperlinked pages, timelines, maps, or visualizations are supposed to be unambiguously user-friendly. Players are expected to risk failure as they solve puzzles and explore dead ends, which is a key part of game play, rather than zip through transparent navigation into the assets of core databases. In fact, the pleasure of a game play experience can often be attributed to its lack of predictability, replicability, and even stability. Furthermore, the attitudes of gamers often focus on celebrating acts of individual hacking meant to gain personal advantage rather than creating universal standards through deliberative processes dictated by professional associations. Feminist games may prove to be doubly transgressive in design. For example, in *The Path* by the Belgian game collective Tale of Tales, going directly to grandma's house ends the game in failure immediately; you need to go into the woods, develop sexually, and risk danger among the wolves in order to have any hope of gaining knowledge of the game world.

10

To position oneself as a feminist can also be difficult in the context of participating in civil discourse in digital culture. In the mid-nineties cyberfeminist critics promised that new forms of social relations constituted by user-generated content on distributed networks would reshape existing architectures that defined gendered power relations, but now many who study social network sites, computer games, and virtual worlds contend that it is difficult to mount resistance against a neoliberal agenda promoted by the very design of infrastructures and interfaces upon which our technologically mediated existence depends [Gajjala and Oh 2012]. Furthermore, although identifying as a feminist critic can be an act of solidarity with like-minded others, lines of inquiry in game studies that

challenge the dominant culture can also risk exposure to the rhetorical violence of anti-feminist online affinity groups, as Mia Consalvo points out:

While I was writing this piece, for example, a Canadian blogger created a game where one can punch and bruise the face of Anita Sarkeesian, creator of the popular website *Feminist Frequency: Conversations with Pop Culture* [Spurr2012]. The game was in response to news of her Kickstarter campaign, where she proposed investigating portrayals of women in videogames over the past few decades. The game was only the latest in a string of attacks on Sarkeesian for her proposed project: she also received death threats, had her Wikipedia page defaced with pornographic imagery, and was repeatedly harassed on the Kickstarter page and elsewhere.

11

Much as feminist bloggers have been victimized by Internet harassment for taking a stand against particular forms of aggressive online conduct accepted as normative, feminist game critics might sometimes find themselves targeted for challenging the hypermasculinity of existing user behavior.

12

To understand the landscape of feminist game studies it may be helpful to look at the prototypical collaboration of Ludica, a group of four feminist game scholars (Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce) who took turns presenting their collectively authored papers at game conferences throughout the world. The group wrote a paper for the Digital Games Research Association that generated considerable controversy among that research community by calling attention to what they called "the hegemony of play" that defined the user population of computer games too narrowly and ignored large populations of supposed "non-gamers" who actively played online card games or participated in virtual worlds that focused on clothing or social interaction. In this call to action Ludica envisioned a three-pronged systematic critique of existing scholarship and design research around games that would encompass "1) the production process and environment for the creation of digital games; 2) the technologies of play, including the evolution of games from folk traditions and cultural artifacts to industrial products and intellectual property, and now to digital products and virtual societies; and 3) the cultural positioning of games and 'gamers'" [Fron et al. 2007]. They noted biases of age and race as well as biases of gender in how games and gamers were counted and defined.

13

What currently constitutes the "big data" digital humanities may be similarly charged with ignoring large contingents of archival practitioners by virtue of how their labor may be gendered and valued, especially given the long pre-digital history of low-status librarianship in schools and communities and the tendency for men to occupy managerial positions in more prestigious libraries [Golub 2010]. Certainly, only the largest city libraries, such as the New York Public Library, are sufficiently capitalized and connected for participation in NEH-scale digital humanities research projects, while local librarians must focus on their service as infomediaries who help clients navigate the user-interfaces of computer databases and locate and interpret sources that meet their needs [Ramirez,

Parthasarathy, and Gordon 2009]. Ironically, city and school libraries are also more likely to have the game and social media functions of their computer networks curtailed by government regulators intent on users only accessing high-status approved sites for purposes of legitimated research labor [Losh and Jenkins 2012].

To think about the "small" data digital humanities for a moment, it might be useful to look at the function of niche audience websites like The Library Observatory, an open-submission Tumblr blog, where users can "post screenshots of quirks in data from the Digital Public Library of America," such as cataloging typos or sloppy metadata parameters, which have been made visible by The Library Observatory's main digital humanities visualization site operated by Harvard's metaLAB. Just as "mess" is an important category for feminist HCI researchers [Dourish and Bell 2011], it also might be important in the small data digital humanities, where the foibles of manual labor might be made manifest by chuckles in the blogosphere over the bejeweled and manicured hand of a female digitizer accidentally appearing in the Google Book Search results for *The Gentleman's Magazine* [Losh 2009].

Collaborative scholarship has been an important practice among intersecting groups of feminist game scholars. For example, Ludica's Pearce also served as a coauthor of Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method, along with Tom Beollstroff, Bonnie Nardi, and T.L. Taylor. This handbook not only emphasizes the important contributions of feminist ethnography to our understanding of digital culture but also criticizes the instrumentalism, quantification, and subsequent myopia of the scientific rationalism that derides subjective, personal, or embodied perspectives. Yet collaborative authorship in the digital humanities cannot be similarly strongly correlated with feminism. Only one of the ten authors of the critical code studies book *10 PRINT* was female, and women made up only a fraction of the multiple authors of the "crowdsourced" book from the University of Michigan Press *Hacking the Academy*. Perhaps this is not surprising given the machismo sometimes associated with multiple authorship in other forms of digital textual collaboration, such as when hackers generate code or Wikipedia editors produce pages or computer scientists rack up publications with the multiple authorship that defines their scholarly networks.

Yet feminists can make distinct contributions by providing opportunities for digital humanists to think across disciplines, particularly to consider how the literature of the social sciences or of the digital arts can trouble the simple model of coding knowledge promulgated by the humanities computing paradigm. After all, to visit a digital archive as a remote user still involves accessing, browsing, reading, and wayfinding. In particular, contemporary researchers in human-computer interaction point to the importance of considering how embodiment or identity is experienced by computer users who are engaged in computer mediated practices of telepresence or ubiquity, and feminist game scholars have led in their discipline on these issues. For example, Taylor asserts that designers should "rise to the challenge presented by a sociology of the body" ([Taylor 2006, 124]).

In *Communities of Play*, Pearce focuses on how inhabitants of virtual worlds understand their own social construction of identity and experience intersubjectivity. Pearce uses feminist ethnography to ground her research on members of the "*Uru* diaspora" of players who were forced to recreate their familiar 3D world in new platforms after the game was discontinued, much as participants in many digital humanities initiatives must cope with choosing between the options of "emulation" or "migration" when hardware or software that supports a beloved project becomes obsolete. She observes that "feminist ethnography has long challenged boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity, individual and society, researcher and subject, fact and faction, self and other, and art and science" [Pearce 2009, 21]. It is worth noting that successful digital humanities projects often encourage imaginative identification with other times and places and allow the visitor to become a participant in historical narratives.

Although feminist game studies is still a relatively new area of inquiry, it also benefits from opportunities to reflect on its own intellectual history. Looking back to the work of Sherry Turkle on the shift in the mid-1980s away from hard mastery and toward "soft" forms of computer use in which "the computer is still a tool but less like a hammer and more like a harpsichord" in Turkle's words (63), Mimi Ito argues that gaming is much like other domains of digital mastery in that user behavior can't be reduced to a "feminine" stance of "soft" engagement that might only reinforce gender norms (147). In contrast, Mary Flanagan feels like she can build on the work of feminist pioneer Brenda Laurel in seeing herself as a "culture worker" capable of "conscious interventions" that foster "action styles" that offer "models for other emerging practices" and "sites of empowerment" to marginalized groups (256). Of course, the promotion of feminist game studies has to do with the agencies of peers as well as the existence of progenitors, so perhaps this issue of DHQ will serve as an important early step in field building.

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