Experiencing Games
A study in how children experience games and how this is related to gender

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Abstract

This thesis examines how young children experience games and how that question is related to gender. The examination of this question is conducted through interviews with a group of 24 Swedish fifth-grade pupils. The paper also draws from theories and concepts found in established literature on gender and games. The results of this thesis informs the theory of violence as a masculine preference as well as the separation of gender identities from biological sexes.

Keywords

Game design
Compulsory school pupils
Interviews
Gender
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1. Introduction

Why people like certain games is the question that inspired this thesis. Why do young boys like realistic, violent shooter games? Why do young girls not like those games? This thesis does not look at these questions as they imply a truth behind the questions. Girls and boys have different preferences, but these preferences are not exclusive to each gender. Young boys may not exclusively prefer violent subjects and young girls may not exclusively shy away from them. Tastes and preferences are mixed and matched between the sexes, so the question is not why some groups like a certain game, but rather how the individuals experience games. Questions like, how do young girls experience violent games, or how do young boys experience cartoon-styled games? How do youths in general experience a game that allows for diplomatic solutions instead of brutal one-on-one fights?

However, the one specific question this thesis explores is how do children experience games through the games' visual and ludic elements, and is this related to gender? This thesis explores the how of young children's preferences and its relation to gender through interviews with young boys and girls. It also draws from established queer and gender theory and supports the discussion of gender identity as a separate entity from the biological sex.

1.1 Background

“In addition, gaming was seen as part of a broader pathway into technology, and girls were missing out. However, in 1996, when Barbie Fashion Designer became the most successful game of the year, it proved that there was a viable market for girls.”

(Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner and Jennifer Y. Sun 2008: xi)

In the 1990's, the electronic gaming industry remained entrenched in a public assumption that games were essentially toys. No matter at which age you played, electronic games for consoles and personal computers were considered to be best appropriate for children and teens. This may have been an influencing factor on what followed Barbie Fashion Designer's economic success in 1996. Post-1996, the electronic gaming industry realized that if one game carrying a female-focused aesthetic, à la Barbie, could sell 500 000 units within two months after its release, why not attempt to repeat that same success? Following this realization, game studios began producing so-called pink games (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 1998: 46).

In Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat - New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming, the preface argues that the design of pink games were heavily predicated on strongly gender-typed toy preferences. The perception of games as toys carried over gender-typed aesthetics from actual toys like dolls, cars or stuffed animals. How pink games actually played is a matter of discussion as much focus was put into making the games' visual and thematic aesthetic appeal directly to a female audience but, ostensibly, very little care was put into the ludic elements of
pink games. Pink games carried only a superficial visual aesthetic that was aimed at the same young girls that Barbie-dolls were aimed at. In summation, pink games are called as such because they are visually designed with a strong gender-typed aesthetic to appeal to young girls (Kafai, Heeter, Denner and Sun 2008: xv; Lazzaro 2008: 208).

Around the same time that Barbie Fashion Designer was developed and sold in toy stores, a different type of game aimed at the female demographic appeared on the markets as well. Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat - New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming calls these games “purple games” in tribute to the company, Purple Moon, famous for the Rockett-series of electronic games also aimed at a young female demographic. However, as a category described in the book, purple games does not exclude games not produced by Purple Moon. Unlike pink games that were ostensibly only designed to superficially appeal to young girls, games from the Nancy Drew- and Rockett-series of games, that fall into the purple games-category, were designed with an increased focus on real-life issues of interest to girls and women, rather than the overly feminine visual aesthetic of pink games. Unlike pink games, purple games remained in the markets for longer as games aimed at a young female demographic even today. While there still exist a market for pink games (see Barbie Dreamhouse Party, 2013), it is a relatively small and niched market and, like purple games, is facing much criticism from feminist viewpoints (Kafai, Heeter, Denner and Sun 2008: xvi; Lazzaro 2008: 208).

The practices of designing games for girls and women during the mid-to-late 1990’s were predicated on the essentialization of girls, and by extension boys as well. The essentialization of girls in this context meaning the assumption that all girls like and dislike the same things. This assumption is generally unfavoured and understood as faulty as it identifies the subject’s desires based entirely on its biological sex. Such an assumption ignores the history of the subject and its rights to individuality.

There are parallels to be drawn between the essentialization of gender and pop behaviourism in that both might be interpreted as manipulative. In the 1990’s, games for girls were intentionally designed as “games for girls”, while games ostensibly designed for boys were designed without gender in mind. Before the commercial success of Barbie Fashion Designer little to no mind were paid concerning the gender of a game’s demographic due to the assumption that there only existed a male audience. When pink and purple games were being produced in the 1990’s, their production and existence were predicated on tapping into an until-then unexploited market. And with a negligible understanding of what this market’s preferences were, the games were superficially designed to appeal to a young female audience - essentially attempting to manipulate young girls to spend money on a product. Alfie Kohn argues in Punished by Rewards (Kohn 1993: 26) that the practice of relying on extrinsic motivators to drive children towards acting responsibly assumes that “they could not or would not choose to act this way on their own. Similarly, the practice of superficial or visual manipulation found in pink games assumes that young girls could not or would not choose to play electronic games on their own (Kafai, Heeter, Denner and Sun 2008: xiv-xv; Lazzaro 2008: 208; Kohn 1993: 26).
Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat - New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming makes a note that by 2007, game design for female audiences have shifted from the essentialization of girls to a much more complex approach based on the theories of Judith Butler (1990) and gender as a socially constructed identity. This as a supposed result of the growth of the universal female gamer audience as a product of economic changes in the game industry, technology becoming more user-friendly and widely available and the appearance of female faces as entrepreneurs in the mid-1990’s. As women became more prominent in the gaming consciousness, more qualitative focus was invested in researching their preferences, ergo, the diminishment of pink and purple games (Kafai, Heeter, Denner & Sun 2008: xvi; Jenkins and Cassell 2008: 5-9).

Keeping in mind the concept of a shift from the essentializing of genders to the careful consideration of gender as a social construct in games, as mentioned by Kafai, Heeter, Denner and Sun, it would be optimistic to assume that as pink games diminished from the gaming consciousness so would the essentialization of genders. But just as pink games still exist today, albeit with a smaller audience in mind, so does the essentialization of genders. In 2013, Sophie Prell interviewed Jean-Max Moris, of DONTNOD Entertainment, about the upcoming game, Remember Me. The game features a female playable protagonist and in the interview, Jean-Max is quoted to have had problems finding financial backers of Remember Me on the basis that a male audience had no desire to play as a woman. A recent study by Marcis Liepa, conducted on 91 Swedish male gamers concerning their play preferences, points to that a playable character’s gender might be irrelevant. Despite the turn to more complex approaches on gender by some people and the proposal that gender may be irrelevant in a game context, essentialization of gender still exists in the gaming consciousness (Prell 2013; Liepa 2013).

Essentialization of gender remains controversial and complicated because of how it assumes that the biological sex is a fundamental cornerstone of how a subject’s preferences are built. We know from theorists like Judith Butler (1990) that one’s perceived gender is actually socially constructed rather than biologically predefined. This means that applying gender terms based off of biology is a practice which may become redundant and outdated in the future as we gain a further understanding of the subjective nature of gender. Cornelia Brunner proposes in 2008 that we introduce the butch-femme continuum as a way of describing gender-predicated differences rather than describing differences based off of the traditional, biology-based male-female distinction. The butch-femme continuum asserts two concepts, 1: that male and masculine, like female and feminine, does not mean the same thing and 2: that feminine and masculine perspectives are mixed and shared within each individual to different extents. What this results in is that we may describe a certain attribute as particularly feminine and another attribute as particularly masculine without implying that only biological females exclusively relate to feminine attributes and that only biological males exclusively relate to masculine attributes. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins acknowledges that this proposal may just lead to replacing one set of problematic distinctions with another set of equally problematic distinctions but that, at the very least, the butch-femme continuum at least
highlights that gender identity is intrinsically complex and fluid (Butler 1990: 55, 223-231; Brunner 2008: 35-36; Jenkins & Cassell 2008: 10).

We can assume that in our contemporary situation the point of interest in games for boys and girls lies within game design and not visual design, as argued by Nicole Lazzaro. But while there is much to refer to in this approach, very little can be found that either discredits or informs the concept about how visual cues may attract young children and if this is in some way related to gender. If young girls actually like the ultra-pink, feminine aesthetic of *pink games*, or if young boys have a marked preference for dark and realistic visual aesthetics is an issue side-stepped or unintentionally ignored in favour of approaching the subject more eloquently through careful considerations of how childrens’ play preferences are pronounced. But I feel that without acknowledging this issue and studying it, we may ignore a detail that could pose hazards in the future. If the issue proves to be irrelevant, we should be aware of this so that we may avoid the strong gendering of *pink games* (Heeter & Winn 2008: 284-287; Lazzaro 2008: 200, 208-209).

With all of this in mind, I ask: How do children experience games through the games’ visual and ludic elements, and is this related to gender?

1.2 Research Objectives
This paper intends to examine how young children experience games. More specifically, how children might respond to different kinds of visual cues as well as how they experience gameplay or *ludic* elements. It will also compare and analyze how the answers might differ between sexes. After reading the extensive and varied perspectives on the subject from *Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat - New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, I have gathered that even though some people might play primarily for the sake of a game’s visuals, the act of *play* itself remains an intrinsically important aspect. As Lazzaro argues, “Strongly gendered game designs still need to be fun.”, so it is fair to assume that a game might not be capable of attracting an audience based on its visuals alone (Lazzaro 2008: 208).
2. Method

This study utilizes a two-part approach to gathering information about how children might experience games. The first part is a quantitative survey to establish how the gaming habits and superficial game preferences are spread in a group of 24 Swedish fifth-grade pupils. The second part is qualitative and inductive and consists of personal interviews with the pupils in five separate groups to produce more substantial results concerning the pupils’ game preferences.

2.1 Surveys and Interviews

The information gathering for the study, as divided into two parts are designated denominations, Part one for the quantitative surveys and Part two for the interviews. The surveys were handed out to the interviewees before the interviews were conducted.

For Part one, two core questions and two follow-up questions to the first are set. Both the surveys and interviews were conducted in Swedish and have been translated into English.

Part one

1. Do you play computer/video games?
   a. If yes: How many hours on an average weekday do you play?
   b. What is your favourite game?
2. Are you a boy or girl?

Additionally, I asked the pupils to sign their names on the surveys for reasons concerning relating the surveys to the correct group which may assist in further understanding of the pupils’ preferences. Furthermore, a study conducted by Caroline Pelletier wherein young children were also interviewed in groups produced results that were contingent on the social structure between those children. In short; because the groups consisted of three boys and three girls, each gendered group attempted to clarify how they were different from the other group; the boys were not part of the girl group and vice versa. Note that Pelletier argues that there is no reason to believe that the interviewees in that group did so deliberately but rather that “... at different times, students understand their own experience as gamers differently.” and that how they discuss their experiences are dependent on the context. Pelletier came to this assumption as some of the interviewees in that study answered contrastingly in the group interviews and in subsequent individual surveys, where one child may have answered that they did not play violent games in the interview but later answered in the survey that their favourite game was an ostensibly violent one. Keeping Pelletier’s study and methods in mind, I have to acknowledge that some of my interviewees may also provide answers that are contextually dependent. This is why I have chosen to ask my interviewees to sign their names on the surveys as part of my own method and why the surveys were handed to the interviewees before the interviews were conducted. However, these names will remain
anonymous and code names have been issued where appropriate (Pelletier 2008: 147-151).

The core purpose of Part one is to conclude in simple numbers how many hours 24 eleven-to twelve-year-old children spend playing games in total and how these hours are divided between each child and gender.

*Part two* is divided into seven *sections*, each *section* revolving around one particular game and is also divided into two *phases*. A final phase called the “*End phase*” ends each *Section*. *Phase one* consists of showing the interviewees a slideshow of three static images that represent the art style of a game. *Phase one* intends to gauge the visual preferences with the interviewees. *Phase two* consists of showing the interviewees real-time video-footage of the same game. *Phase two* intends to gauge the gameplay preferences of the interviewees. The *End phase* consists of finally asking each of the interviewees which game they would like to play the most, which they would not like to play and which they thought was the best-looking.

The interviews in *Part Two* are conducted thusly:

- Individual groups of interviewees are brought in.
- *First Section* begins.
- *Phase one*: They are then shown a slideshow of three still images of a game.
- As part of *Phase one*, the interviewees are asked the following questions:
  - Does anyone of the interviewees recognize this game? How do they recognize this game?
    - If the answer is positive, ask those who answered such what they think of the game. If the answer is negative, ask those who answered such if this looks like a game they would play.
    - Secondly, ask, based on the still images, what they think of the visuals?
- *Phase one* ends, *Phase two* begins: The interviewees are now shown real-time video footage of the game.
- As part of *Phase two*, after the video has ended, the interviewees are asked the following:
  - (If they had no experience of that game prior to *Phase one*) Did their opinions change after seeing the real-time video footage, from only seeing the still images?
  - Secondly, ask, based on the video footage, what they now think of the visuals?
- *First section* ends with the *End Phase* where the interviewees are asked the following questions:
  - Which of these games would you like to play the most?
  - Which game would you not like to play?
  - Which game was the best-looking in your opinion?
- The subsequent *sections* continue in the same manner.
2.2 Game Selection

The seven games presented, along with their respective development studios and year of release, as part of the study are as listed below in the same order as they were shown to the interviewees:

1. Dust: An Elysian Tail  
   *Humble Hearts, 2012*

2. Far Cry 3  
   *Ubisoft Montreal, 2012*

3. Deus Ex: Human Revolution  
   *Eidos Montreal, 2011*

4. Team Fortress 2  
   *Valve, 2006*

5. Dishonored  
   *Arkane Studios, 2012*

6. Wakfu  
   *Ankama Games, 2012*

7. Killing Floor  
   *Tripwire Interactive, 2009*
These games were chosen because each game has a differently approached art style and gameplay design. *Dust: An Elysian Tail* is a colourful and child-friendly 2-dimensional hack ‘n slash game. *Far Cry 3* is a semi-realistic, 3-dimensional first-person-shooter set in a vibrant tropical environment. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* is a sepia-toned, stylized, 3-dimensional first-person role playing game set in futuristic cyberpunk urban environments. *Team Fortress 2* is a mid-20th century comic-styled online, 3-dimensional, competitive first-person-shooter game. *Dishonored* is a 3-dimensional, first-person stealth action-adventure game with a visual style inspired by early 1900’s traditionalist painters, set in an industrialized London-inspired urban setting. *Wakfu* is a colourful isometric 2-dimensional massively multiplayer role-playing game set in a fantasy world. *Killing Floor* is a semi-realistic, dark and gory first-person shooter set in a gritty post-zombie apocalypse Great Britain.

2.2.1 Game Video Footage Description

As part of *Phase two*, the interviewees are shown video footage of the selected games’ gameplay. These videos were made to present either a specific detail to a game’s gameplay or to present how a game could be typically played. An understandable issue with presenting video footage for the interviewees is that the readers of this paper may never see these videos like the interviewees have. In response to this issue, these videos have been summarized below.
   This video presents some of the first narrative cutscenes of the game and some of the sword- and magic-based combat gameplay early in the game.

   This video presents the core combat- and stealth-based gameplay late in the game where the player stealthily moves in the tropical undergrowth and kills his non-player character foes with firearms.

   This video presents the dialogue system of the game where the protagonist negotiates the release of a hostage from a terrorist.

   This video presents some of the game’s combat gameplay, but half of the video displays the player’s ability to *taunt*, or to generate a brief, nonsensical animation for other players to see.

   This video presents the core stealth-based and magical power-based gameplay as well some parts of the puzzle elements that the game provides.

   This video presents the game's resource-gathering gameplay, movement and combat-gameplay wherein the player fights an anthropomorphic sunflower.

   This video presents the game's core combat gameplay where the player gorely kills non-player character monsters with shotguns and pistols.

2.3 Participant Selection

The interviews were conducted on 24 Swedish fifth-grade pupils from an elementary school in the city of Visby in the municipality of Gotland. The 24 pupils come from two separate classes, that together make up for 34 children in total. The age group of the children spans between eleven to twelve years. The school and its fifth-grade pupils were opportunistically selected as I had an amiable relationship with the headmaster and several of the teachers of the school in question and I initially desired to interview a class of sixth-grade pupils. However, due to certain obligations that the sixth-grade pupils had, it became a practical impossibility to interview that particular group, fortunately though, I was allowed to interview the school’s fifth-grade pupils.

2.4 Ethics

Due to ethical and legal reasons, the children would not be allowed to partake in the study
without the informed consent of a legal guardian. Out of 34 pupils, only 24 were permitted by their respective legal guardians to partake in the study. Out of these, 12 children were boys and 12 were girls.

2.5 External Factors

For the interviews, five groups were made with the assistance of the class teachers. Four groups consisted of five pupils and one consisted of four pupils. The pupils were placed in the groups on the provision that the groups consisted of pupils that were on good terms with each other. The assumption being that children who are friends may be more inclined to be honest than children who are on potentially unfriendly terms with each other.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish which means that some words or sentences are quoted from Swedish and have been translated into English. Any words or sentences within quotation marks are always direct quotes in Swedish which have been translated into English.
3. Results

3.1 Part one – Individual Playtimes

Twelve male and twelve female pupils were each asked in survey form if they play computer or video games and subsequently how many hours they would spend playing on an average week day. Note that the graph displaying individual playtime per day (in hours) only displays individuals who answered positive on the first question of Part one.

![Illustration 8: Result for individual playtime, Borgman, 2014.](image)

The individual answers show that every boy answered that they played electronic games, while only nine girls answered the same. Observing the individual answers also show that while there are more girls playing electronic games than there are girls not playing electronic games, the hours spent by girls playing are observably lower than the hours spent by boys.

The average playtime per individual boy (3.3 hours) also surpass both the average playtime per individual girl (1.25 hours) and the class average (1.3).
It is also possible to derive that the most popular game between genders was *Minecraft* (2011), as four female and four male interviewees named it among their favourite games. And that among the female interviewees, four considered *Geometry Dash* (2014) their favourite and that first-person shooters (*Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, 2012; *Battlefield 4*, 2013; *Call of Duty*, unspecific) were predominantly popular among the male interviewees.

### 3.2 Part two - Interview summaries

The interviews are summarized below for each Section and corresponding Phases of the interviews. Code names have been issued for each interviewee based on the interviewee’s gender (G for *girl*, B for *boy*), the group number and an arbitrary letter from a to e that distinguish the interviewees from each other. For example, G4b is a name for a *girl* in Group 4 while B5b is a name for a *boy* in Group 5 and G4a is a name for a different *girl* in Group 4.
3.2.1 Prior Recognition of The Selected Games

In *Phase one*, the interviewees are shown a slideshow of three static images of a game and asked if they recognize which game it is. The graph only displays positive responses.

The results show that it is more common for boys to have had prior knowledge of most games shown. Marked exceptions are of *Dust: An Elysian Tail* (2012) where more girls than boys knew of the game, and *Wakfu* (2012) which none of the interviewees knew of prior to the interview.

![Game recognition statistics, Borgman, 2014.](Illustration 11: Game recognition statistics, Borgman, 2014.)

3.2.2 *Phase One* – How The Interviewees Experience Games Through A Static Medium

A majority of the female interviewees show a marked positive preference for *Dust: An Elysian Tail*, *Team Fortress 2* and *Wakfu*. Additionally, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and *Killing Floor* are games that the female interviewees either dislike or show relative disinterest in. For *Far Cry 3* and *Dishonored* the results lean towards the positive side of the spectrum but holistically, the majority is somewhat marginable.

The female often interviewees experience unrealistic, cartoon-styled and colourful game visuals quite favourably as their positive responses to *Dust: An Elysian Tail*, *Team Fortress 2* and *Wakfu* affirms. Realism, dark colour schemes and themes of violence, gore and horror are often experienced in a comparatively negative light as the responses to *Killing Floor*, as well as some responses to *Far Cry 3*, affirms. Additionally, common praise by the female interviewees was given to “richly detailed” scenes, this applies especially to *Dishonored.*
The male interviewees displayed much more variance in their responses. The results for *Far Cry 3* and *Dishonored* are the only ones that show an interestingly marked preference within the majority of the male interviewees.

The male interviewees also experience colourful graphics positively but are hesitant to accepting cartoon-styled visuals in first-person shooters, as evidenced by the responses to *Team Fortress 2*. They also seem to have a relative preference towards realism and dark colour schemes and they do not shy away from *violent subjects and themes* as the positive responses to *Far Cry 3*, *Killing Floor* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* affirms.
3.2.3 Phase Two - How The Interviewees Experience Games Through A Moving Medium

The responses given during Phase two show that the female interviewees have a marked positive preference to Dust: An Elysian Tail, Team Fortress 2 and Wakfu. The results also show a notable aversion to Killing Floor and a slight disinterest for Far Cry 3. Some of the interviewees showed an interest in trying both Far Cry 3 and Killing Floor, even though their opinions were also fairly negative. The responses to Deus Ex: Human Revolution and Dishonored had more variance and may be complementary to the responses from Phase one. If the responses to Deus Ex: Human Revolution signify a disinterest in non-violence is difficult to interpret as the video of Team Fortress 2 display relatively similar levels of violence. Despite this however, most of the female interviewees expressed a notable disinterest in overly violent subjects. Interviewee G1a often explained her disinterest in Far Cry 3, Deus Ex: Human Revolution and Killing Floor as she perceived them to be "bloody", in this context meaning scary or excessively violent. The majority of Group 2 had a similar argument for their distaste for Killing Floor.

Most female interviewees are reluctant to play games featuring violent themes, a minority might be interested in trying the more violent games for a single time and see how things move from there. Positive responses to Dust: An Elysian tail and Wakfu may signify a preference for either a certain visual aesthetic or an implied positive preference for fantasy themes. There is also a strong possibility that the female interviewees remark positively to games where they are able to play together, which is supported by signs of interest to Killing Floor once they are informed that Killing Floor supports co-operative play. The positive responses given to Team Fortress 2 are difficult to interpret but there is a slight possibility that the ability to express oneself outside of the main gameplay goal is important to the female interviewees. This may be affirmed by comments praising the option of taunting in Team Fortress 2, wherein the player is allowed to initiate a harmless four-second animation for their chosen playable character.

The responses provided by the male interviewees in Phase two appear complementary to the answers from Phase one. A pronounced change, or development, may be observed when comparing the responses from Phase one and Phase two regarding Deus Ex: Human Revolution, Dishonored and Killing Floor. Deus Ex: Human Revolution spawned some initially divided responses but in Phase two these solidified into a relatively positive response. The positive responses from both genders all focus in on the player’s option of conversing their way through a conflict rather than fighting. For Dishonored, the opinions changed from relative disinterest to high interest. The interviewees in Group 2 specifically point out that empowering gameplay is a positive feature in games, as does one male interviewee in Group 1. Killing Floor gathered a much more solid positive preference in Phase two which is mostly attributed to the interviewees being given more information to process from a video unlike the static images. The divided responses to Wakfu is attributed to the entirety of Group 2 being positive and curious, understanding that as a massively multi-player-game they would be able to play it together. The negative responses imply a trend based on negative perceptions to turn-based combat.
3.2.4 End Phase – How The Interviewees Answered "Which Game They Liked The Most?"

The most significant trend that can be observed from the answers given during the End Phase is that the female interviewees of each group always answered the same. While this is true for a majority of the male interviewees, there always seemed to be a few individuals that either found that they wanted to try a different game from the others or that a different game looked considerably better than the game/s chosen by his peers. For the female interviewees,
there never was such an individual. The one exception lies in Group 1 where only one interviewee was female, but this interviewee also chose differently from the male interviewees. Nonetheless, the process conducted by the female interviewees when choosing a game they would like to play the most or choosing which game they thought was the most visually appealing, the female interviewees all discussed the question for a short moment and then came to a conclusion together. On a similar level, the male interviewees never actually shared such discussions but sometimes, interviewee a would hear interviewee b call Game x the best looking game and in turn be reminded of some positive qualities of Game x which would then lead interviewee a to change his opinion.

The female interviewees were more inclined to discuss their tastes and on an amiable level agree together while the male interviewees responded individually and sometimes change opinions when a peer reminded them of a certain detail.

The previous graphs only track which games the interviewees in each group wanted to play the most and not which game's visuals the interviewees liked the most. This is because most times, a majority of the interviewees chose the same game as the both the "best-looking" and the one they would like to play the most.
4. Discussion

It can be assumed from the perspectives detailed in *Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat - New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming* that gender-typing games superficially by applying distinct visual styles and *supposed* masculine/feminine ideals create games that are too niched to be critically or commercially successful. The idea is that the more you focus on how boys and girls are different, the more you ignore what they have in common. Keeping this in mind while also remembering the *butch-femme continuum*, we may assume that about every biological boy and girl shares some butch and some femme attributes. Therefore, a game from the 1990’s *pink game*-category may not only shut out the unintended male demographic, but also a significant portion of the intended female demographic as well. Ergo, the problem lies fundamentally in the essentialization of the sexes and equating feminine as intrinsically female and masculine as intrinsically male. What we may do to approach this problem is to cease this essentialization of individuals and instead carefully define attributes in the *butch-femme continuum* which we can then refer to. Hopefully, this may allow for people to analyze themselves, their gender identity and their personality attributes as some parts feminine and some parts masculine rather than-designating their identity as either exclusively male or female with no middle ground. This in turn may lead designers to develop games with elements that are aimed at a demographic which may subscribe to masculine perspectives but is not exclusively male.

The issue that follows is to attempt the definition of “feminine” and “masculine” attributes and ludic elements. Because both of these words are either linguistically or intrinsically coded “female” and “male” respectively despite the intention of making them disconnected from biology, the matter of confusion persists. To exemplify this, Heeter and Winn’s studies (2008) suggest that a typical feminine play preference is *exploration* while a typical masculine play preference is *completion*. This suggestion is based on studies conducted on male and female gamers and so it is fair to assume that Heeter and Winn assumes that *completion* is a masculine play preference because a majority of male gamers play to *complete* rather than to *explore*. Therefore, we may assume that people of masculine perspectives would enjoy score-based ludic elements and definitive win states. But if Heeter and Winn derived the suggestion that *completion* is masculine by relating it to a marked play preference with males, we might lose track of why we began using the *butch-femme continuum* as a model of distinction in the first place. We use the *butch-femme continuum* as a model of distinction because it highlights that gender identity may be unbound by biology, but if we must derive a *feminine* distinction out of a biological female’s personality or behaviour, we must acknowledge this as a matter of concern (Heeter & Winn 2008: 281-287).

I concede that until masculine and feminine attributes are shared equally between the sexes, we might be forced to accept the practice of deriving masculine attributes from males and feminine attributes from females.

Denner and Campe (2008), as well as a report by Children Now (2001), suggest that *low*
violence, exploration and creative elements are key attributes for feminine play while masculine play is highly competitive and success-focused, in this context success-focused implies that winning or beating the game and/or other players is one of the, if not the, main purpose of the game. Score-based competitive multiplayer games may be defined as highly masculine while games that have a high emphasis on creative player expression may be defined as highly feminine (Denner & Campe 2008: 130, 131, 136, 140; Children Now 2001).

The results gathered from the study outlined as part of this paper inform the suggestion that attributes and elements in games that are linked to high violence are opposing attributes to feminine play but supportive, or at the very least nonobtrusive, to masculine play. In other words, feminine play is typically tied to non-violence while the opposite is true for masculine play. Additionally, a typical masculine preference with games are visuals that represent a close approximation of reality, or realistic graphics. As was the case of the male interviewees who, for the most part, either liked or did not mind the art direction of Far Cry 3 and Killing Floor, unlike the female interviewees who often remarked that these two games were unappealing. This might be tied to the masculine preference of violent themes and subjects, but on what exact level or which fundamental these two are linked together through, I have no source to refer to. Regardless, there were several male interviewees who rather liked Dust: An Elysian Tail as well and many cited that they preferred the colourful jungles of Far Cry 3 over the dark urban environments of Deus Ex: Human Revolution. Meanwhile, the feminine visual preference might sometimes reject realism but it seems that this rejection is often tied with a distaste for violent subjects at large and is not exclusive to realism in visuals.

Most of the female interviewees found a positive preference for the art of Wakfu, but the entirety of Group 3, which consisted exclusively of males, did so as well. If the art direction of Wakfu is specifically feminine or masculine is difficult to interpret. But assume that there exists a concept like "preferred visual cues for feminine/masculine perspectives", and assume, strictly hypothetically, that a "typically feminine visual cue" is a highly saturated colour scheme. A static picture of a game might contain this and many more of the "preferred visual cues for feminine perspectives", but if the picture also conveys a highly violent theme, message and/or story, how do you define this picture? Is it masculine because of the high violence, or feminine because of its highly saturated colour scheme?

4.1 Conclusion

When the female interviewees disliked the presentation of Far Cry 3 as part of my interview, they often pointed to the violent themes that was conveyed within the presentation material, but even those who disliked the conveyed violence conceded that they liked the visuals of the game. All of this suggest that it is the context that defines whether a game appears visually masculine or feminine and not the visuals alone. Thusly, the results of my study inform the theory that masculine perspectives favours violent subject matters. But it also supports the
separation of gender perspectives from the biological sexes.

Future exploration in how children experience games might do well in extending the methods described as part of this thesis by offering a broader selection of games to present and having additional quantitative tests to gauge how certain colour schemes appeal specifically to certain demographics. And since previous studies have been made to support theories of violence as a masculine preference since the original *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat – Gender and Computer Games* (1998), the significance of the findings of this thesis might be considered minor but it may still be relevant for as long as we continue to discuss gender and games.
References

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