Designing Gendered Games
Values of designers and users of gendered toys

Els Rommes

Institute for Gender Studies

Radboud University Nijmegen

P.O.Box 9104

6500 HE Nijmegen, Netherlands

e.rommes@pwo.ru.nl

Josine Oude Geerink van Leijen

ABSTRACT

In a small-scale study we have analyzed the genderscripts of the toys of three Dutch toy producing companies and we have interviewed owners and directors of these companies. We found large differences in the 'genderedness' of the games they were producing. We have found explanations for these differences in differences in the (feminist) values that the directors of these companies had. Moreover, we have interviewed eight girls (9-13 years old) on their game playing behaviour and observed them while they played masculine connotated games, to see how they dealt with the genderedness of these games. Indeed, although gender specific games may play an important part in the gendering of children and computer games may help to present computer science as something 'for boys', children also have some agency in dealing with the dominant discourses around gendered games.

Keywords

Games can be gendered in various ways, they can have various 'genderscripts' (Oudshoorn 1996; Rommes 2002). Some games have a symbolic gender connotation. This is the case if they aim at e.g. boys and use blue or dark colors or if pictures of the players of the game on the package or in the advertisements around the toy represent only boys or only girls. They may also have a gender connotation if the player has no choice in the sex of the avatar. Games can also be structurally gendered, if they refer to professions or locations in society where more men (or women) are found, e.g. if toys refer to the army or mobility sector (e.g. shooter-games or racing games) or if they refer to household tasks or the beauty queen industry (e.g. Barbie fashion designer). Last but not least, games may refer to characteristics that we in present day western society associate with femininity or masculinity, e.g. relational values and cooperation versus violence and competition. Following this classification, games can be marked as 'gender specific': meaning that all its characteristics point in one direction and the games aim at the 'girly girl' or 'macho boy' market. They may also be 'gender neutral'. Gender neutral games may e.g. have non-gender specific colors, allow choice for the sex of the avatars and refer to non-gender specific locations (e.g. family life in the SIMs) and players need to have non gender specific interests and characteristics, e.g. curiosity and the will to learn. Games can also be depicted as 'gender bending' games, if the symbolic, location or characteristics markers point in distinct, but different gendered directions. Alternatively, games may also be gender bending (or gender conforming) if persons in the game are shown in non stereotypical (or stereotypical) positions, e.g. if a woman is the action hero and the man is in need of rescue.

In a small-scale study we have analyzed the genderscripts of the toys of three Dutch toy producing companies and we have interviewed owners and directors of these companies. We found large differences in the kinds of games they were producing. Three quarters of the toys made by the largest company 'Jumbo' can be considered as gender neutral or even gender bending games. About half of the games made by the small company 'Sri Toys', a company which specialized in wooden and cuddly toys designed in the Netherlands but produced in Sri Lanka, can be considered as gender neutral. The other half was gender specific of which a majority aimed at boys, a few of which have some gender bending characteristics (e.g. a spaceship made of cloth). The company 'Robo Educational Toys' made glove puppets for the educational market. Of these toys, about a third can be considered gender specific, half of these aiming at boys and the other half at girls.

Why were decisions made to design gender specific, gender neutral or even gender bending games in these companies? Several factors could explain the differences between the companies. The main explanation could be that 'the market' asks for gender specific games. Whereas the market for Jumbo was the retail trade (who sell toys to children and their parents), Robo Educational Toys aimed at wholesale traders who sold their games to educational institutes like schools. Sri Toys mostly aimed at the retail trade, but also sold some products to the educational market. According to the interviewees, games for the educational markets need to be gender neutral or even anti-stereotypical. As the owner of Sri Toys, Mr. Swart said: 'my toys are breaking stereotypes, that's what they want in educational contexts'

(interview Swart, p. 13). This may partially explain why the directors of Robo Educational Toys and Sri Toys designed many gender neutral or even gender bending toys. However, we have observed that Jumbo made even less gender specific and stereotypical toys than the companies who had customers in the educational sector. So what did children and their parents want and how did the companies know about this?

We have found large differences in the ways in which producers obtained information on the (dis)likes of the children for whom they were designing. All companies to some extent used information about which products 'sold well' or some awareness of 'trends' on the games market. According to two of the interviewees, this trend was towards more gender specific games, especially aimed at girls. Next to this 'gut feeling' on what 'the market' would want, the companies also used some user representation techniques. Whereas Jumbo, as a large company, invested in some explicit user-representation techniques, Sri Toys combined the I methodology with relying on stereotypes (Rommes 2006) and Robo Educational Toys, mostly used the I methodology combined with some user-testing. It seems that Jumbo was most explicitly aware of the wishes of children and their parents and Sri Toys the least. Their use of the I methodology may explain why so many of the gender specific toys of Sri Toys aimed at boys: the two male designers made their toys to fit what they themselves as children had liked. Moreover, the designers of Sri Toys clearly saw 'boy's toys' as the norm.

As all game producers to a smaller or larger extent used the I methodology and their own 'gut feeling' about what they thought children would like, it becomes crucial to know which feminist and other values were important for them and whether these values influenced their design choices.[1] Indeed, the differences between the directors of these companies in terms of the values and beliefs behind the toys they produced, were very large and could easily explain the differences in the gender specificity of their toys. Although for all directors it was important to earn money, they also held to some values like being environmental friendly ('I wouldn't want to produce toys that will be thrown away immediately, that would be bad for the environment'), being historically correct and being 'modern'. Some examples of clashes of these values showed how important certain values were for them. For example, several of the directors wanted their toys to look 'modern' and hence they wanted to have some unstereotypical roles (e.g. a female dentist puppet with a male assistant). In several toys, this value would clash with the value of being 'historically

correct', so the idea of making a female Indian with a bow and arrows was abandoned by Sri Toys. Similarly, when Jumbo 'modernized' their war game 'Stratego', they changed the sex of the character of the 'spy', but decided against any other sex-changes of the other characters in the game, as 'that would be historically incorrect'. The main difference in feminist values was that whereas the two male directors of Sri Toys and the female director Robo Educational Toys did not believe that toys made much of a difference in the upbringing of children as boy or girl, the female director of Jumbo felt that toys could have a large impact and saw it partially as her responsibility as a game developer to provide gender neutral or even gender bending toys. So she and her team consciously chose to design mostly gender neutral toys, or to represent boys on a package for a game that appealed to female connotated characteristics and vice versa. All in all, having more tests with potential users of toys and/or having someone in charge with feminist values may indeed affect the percentage of gender neutral or gender bending games.

To study how hard or easy it is for girls to play with games that are gender specific and aim at boys, we interviewed and observed eight girls who played with gender specific computer games.[2] It became clear that all of the girls in some way or another had to explain to themselves and their friends why they as girls liked to play with male connotated games. They were very aware of discourses on how girls and computer games don't go together, especially not if these games involve competition and violence. The freedom they felt to behave differently than the discourse prescribed varied amongst the girls depending on the role models around them (especially their mother seemed important in this respect), their perception of 'acceptable behaviour' for girls at school and their perception of themselves as more or less boyish or girlish. Moreover, the contradictions and gaps in their way of talking about competition and violence shows not only differences between girls and their perception of discourses but also some of the agency girls had in dealing with these discourses. Girls would e.g. make differences between kinds of violence (with or without guns, with or without blood) and kinds of competition (against the computer/against persons, playing against another girl or against boys) that were ok or not, to explain why their preferred way of playing was different of that of most girls, but acceptable. This additional research shows that not only producers, but also users have agency in dealing with gender stereotypes connected with gendered games playing, but also how influential ideas on biological differences between boys and girls still are.

---

[1] In previous work we have observed that the presence of feminists in important positions in an organization may influence the outcome of the product.

[2] We thank master student Maartje Bos for her important contribution to this paper

REFERENCES

1.	Oudshoorn, Nellie. (1996). "Genderscripts in technologie. Noodlot of uitdaging?" Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies **4**: 350-367.

2.	Rommes, Els. (2002). Gender Scripts and the Internet; The Design and Use of Amsterdam's Digital City. Enschede, Twente University.

3.	Rommes, Els. (2006). Gender sensitive design practices. Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology. E. M. Trauth. Heshey, London, Melbourne, Singapore, Idea Group Reference**:** 675-68S.