

Cross-generational gender constructions. Women, teenagers and technology

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Abstract

Despite the supposed inroads of feminism, gender equality and new 'democratic' means of technological communication, adult women and teenage girls in the UK continue to emphasise what Valerie Walkerdine has termed the 'habitual "feminine" position of incompetence' (2006, 526). This article draws on two complimentary research projects in order to investigate the cross-generational gender constructions women and teenagers articulate. Drawing on Negra's notion of a 'cover story' (2009, 44), this article suggests that we can read the claims and practices of the women and teenagers in terms of how they frame new ideologies of femininity. Further, the continual recourse to an essential feminine position of exclusion is detrimentally shaping not only technological use, but also the wider operationalization of gender in public and private arenas. Focussing specifically on the female populations of the research projects, we demonstrate how gender continues to emerge and be produced by women and girls in negotiated, but highly problematic ways. Rather than considering gender as a determining force, it emerges here as a carefully constructed tool for engagement, and as a distancing device facilitating a claim of, and towards, disinterest. The two projects suggest implications for future mediations and relations with new media technology; they also suggest that across generations, women are detrimentally fixing and restricting potential and actual performances of gender through the evocation of a more traditional femininity .

This article explores cross-generational constructions of gender through two research projects investigating relationships and mediations with technology. Drawing on interviews with adult women gamers in the UK and female teenage participants in digital media workshops organised by the BBC, it explores what it *means* to claim to be technologically competent specifically in relation to gender. We argue, first, that the claims the adult women and teenage girls make have an impact upon potential and actual technological use. Secondly, we suggest that the theoretical framework provided by Diane Negra – that of a post feminist 'cover story' (Negra, 2009: 44) – provides a useful way of approaching these claims and articulations. Focussing specifically on the female populations of the complimentary research projects, the article demonstrates how gender continues to emerge and be produced by women and

girls in negotiated, convoluted and highly problematic ways. Gender emerges here specifically in relation to technology as a complex enabler of a carefully constructed engagement, and as a distancing device facilitating a claim of, and towards, disinterest. That these claims and articulations are being premised on a discourse of 'choice' also raises pertinent questions about a new, and troubling, discourse of femininity. Although we use case studies taken from research investigating new media, the claims and constructions these women and teenagers offer have a much wider impact. They relate not only to potential and actual engagements with technology, but to perceptions and productions of gender *per se* as something quite rigidly defined and enacted. Indeed, the research suggests a social, cultural and *cross-generational* trend, which continues to emphasise what Valerie Walkerdine has termed the 'habitual "feminine" position of incompetence' (2006, 526) despite *supposed* inroads not just of feminism, but also of the technologically competent younger generation, and of increased everyday mediatisation (see for example Tapscott, 1998; Castells, 1996; Rheingold, 1991, 1994). The assertions the women and teenagers' offer tend to claim disinterest or exclusion, and although initially claimed as individual choice, ultimately frame subsequent media interaction. They are therefore not only problematic for how they consequently frame future mediations and relations with new media technology; they also work to fix and restrict potential and actual performances of *gender* through the evocation of a post-feminist discourse of choice.

Cover 'stories'

Before discussing the claims and articulations of the women and teenagers, it is worth investigating the central concept used in this article – that of a 'cover-story'. As suggested, the notion of a cover-story relates primarily to Diane Negra's argument that post feminism works as a mask or a smoke screen for what is actually the continuation of more traditional notions of femininity and patriarchal power relations (2009: 44). Drawing on the 2005 news coverage of Jennifer Wilbanks (the 'bride-to-be who secretly ran away via a Greyhound bus a few days before her wedding' (*ibid.*, 36)), Negra argues that the coverage of Wilbanks' disappearance highlights that traditional feminine qualities of domesticity and selflessness continue to define contemporary constructions of femininity despite initial or overt claims to the contrary. By comparison with fictional accounts of 'runaway brides' (eg *It Happened One Night*, 1934; *The Runaway Bride*, 1999), where the runaway bride is celebrated for prioritising and recognising her own desire, the news coverage of Jennifer Wilbanks' disappearance highlighted a real uneasiness about contemporary femininity. As Negra argues, Wilbanks may have recognised her own desire and agency in the act of running away, but her ultimate renunciation of both the marriage narrative and the security of her hometown transformed her from 'valued' to 'object' social subject (*ibid.*, 44–5). For Negra, while fictional

'runaway bride' narratives can be celebratory in the self-discovery message at the heart of the story, they only work as long as the marriage narrative is *also* fundamentally upheld. Taken together, this suggests for Negra that the discourse of post feminism may claim to celebrate qualities such as individuality, autonomy, and agency, but in fact, such qualities are only celebrated within certain carefully regimented parameters. Indeed, for Negra, post feminism is at best a layer to existing discourses of femininity, and at worst, a mask hiding the fact that traditional discourses of femininity continue to be rigidly and problematically defined and enforced:

Postfeminism broadly functions as a cover story for the reality that women's status and security remain in many ways tenuous and family value paradigms sort femininity into categories of values and abjection (Negra, 2009, 44).

For Negra, post feminism is not a new, celebratory concept, then, but a well-disguised rearticulation (to use Ang and Hermes phrase, 1991, 319) of traditional gender stereotypes. However, while Negra's focus is centred on the way *mass media* reproduce more traditional discourses of femininity, we want to use the concept to understand the individual articulations of the research subjects. Indeed, we want to suggest that Negra's concept is not only apparent at a macro level – in the representation of femininity across a range of fictional and non-fictional media but also in the discourses and articulations of women and teenagers themselves.

Our central argument is that Negra's concept is useful as a framing device for thinking about the explanations, performances and stories of our research participants in terms of the content of their articulations. It is also a useful concept for thinking about the *processes* through which the women and teenagers enforce and perform particular ideologies of gender not least because it evokes Judith Butler's seminal work of gender performativity (1990). Indeed, Negra's concept of a cover story highlights a fundamental slippage between articulation and performance because it implies a conscious or unconscious covering *over*. In turn, the concept of a *covering over* has clear resonances with Judith Butler's work on gender, where the acts of gender performance cover over (and highlight through absences) conscious and unconscious negotiations with (for example) identity, imagined others, contextual signifiers, senses of self, desire, and fantasy (1990, 179). Considering that it is a feminist concept of performative gender that we evoke as the primary framing concept for our analysis of the articulations cited in this article (see Butler, 1990, 2004), it is worth briefly detailing these alignments and arguments here.

Working against notions of biological essentialism and difference, and towards an embodied understanding of gender as lived, performed, and negotiated, gender is conceptualized as enmeshed in how we think and live our own identity, and as contingent on social and economic power dynamics of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990; de Lauretis, 1984, 1987; Judith Halberstam,

1998). It is a corporeal and performative understanding of gender, then, as posited by Butler (1990) but developed by feminist theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994), Beverley Skeggs (1997), Luce Irigaray (1987, 2004), Ien Ang and Joke Hermes (1991), Dorothy Hobson (1980, 2003), Radway (1984), Ann Gray (1992), Valerie Walkerdine (1997, 2006, 2007), and Diane Fuss (1989). As Butler argues, gender is ‘an identity tenuously constituted in time’ through conscious and unconscious negotiations with desire, fantasy, imagined others, contextual signifiers and imagined and performed understandings of self (1990, 179). Such negotiations are performed and enacted, but are always-already performative ‘in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means’ (ibid., 173). In turn, this means that the *gendered* body has ‘no ontological status’ (ibid., 173) because it is produced again and again through repetitious acts of gender performance. Indeed, this is what Ien Ang and Joke Hermes refer to when they argue that:

Articulations of [gender] have to be made again and again, day after day, and the fact that the same articulations are so often repeated . . . is not a matter of course; it is, rather, a matter of active re-production, continual rearticulation. (Ang and Hermes, 1991, 319)

Ang and Hermes highlight a further issue also discussed by Butler – the way such acts become sedimented over time, producing normative discourses around the constitution of gender, as well as normative practices and behaviours. As Butler suggests, it is the ‘mundane and ritualized form’ of the performances, which legitimates gender over time (1990, 178). Seen in this light, the discourse of post feminism is one of the normative practices and behaviours that are becoming ritualized over time and through continual articulation. We could argue that it is not only a cover story in the way Negra imagines it – as a smoke screen or layering over – but it is also a cover story in the sense that Butler conceptualizes gender. Indeed, seen here, post feminism is a cover story because, like gender performativity, it creates ‘the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core’ (Butler, 1990, 173). What differentiates it from Butler’s concept of performative gender, then, is not the way post feminism is articulated, negotiated or performed, but rather the *qualities* and *values* it is aligned with, and what this consequently might articulate about normalised conceptions of gender more widely.

Indeed, the more critical concepts of post feminism are also conceptually aligned with Butler in terms of understanding gender as performative. Feminist theorists such as Angela McRobbie (2004, 2009), Sue Thornham (2007), Lois McNay (2000), Jane Arthurs (2003), Ann Braithwaite (2002) and Ros Gill (2007) (to name a few), resonate with Butler when they conceptualise gender as a negotiated and lived performance. However, while they may all conceptualise gender in a similar way, post feminism is afforded a range of different qualities and emphases, and it is worth briefly outlining them here, not least

because they emphasise the fluidity, and pervasiveness, of the term. Indeed, feminist theorists see it variously as a move towards the individual (and *consumer* is implicit here) (Gill, 2007; McNay, 2000; Thornham, 2007), in relation to the notion of *lifestyle choice* (McRobbie, 2004; McNay, 2000), and in terms of a claim towards an (insistently non political) *authorship* (Thornham, 2007; Arthurs, 2003). In these conceptions, post feminism is collapsed somewhat with a concept of a neo-liberal subject who claims authorship through an individual pleasure and agency. This agency, however, is based on a somewhat restrictive non political construction of themselves as female consumers and subjects who may identify with, even claim, some notions of feminism (equality, mobility) but refigure these very insistently back into a personal (rather than public or political) discourse. In conceptualising post feminism as an articulation and celebration of certain qualities, our argument is that the discourse of post feminism facilitates certain claims and engagements particularly around new technology. However, it also shapes and restricts such engagements, so that mediations with technology are only feasible (in a similar vein to Negra) as long as more traditional qualities of femininity are *also* prioritised. We could argue, then, that the women and teenagers in this research perform complex gender roles and identities, which *at the very least* facilitate agency and engagement with technology. However we argue (in keeping with Negra 2009, and McRobbie's more critical stance, 2009), that what we are actually witnessing is a re-emergence of traditional concepts of femininity.

The 'case studies'

The evidence presented here is drawn from from a number of interviews with adult women and teenage girls in the past 5 years, as part of two different, but complimentary, research projects both looking at 'new' digital media. Our aim in drawing on two different research projects is not to enter into a methodological or epistemological debate, but to argue that the findings are all the more profound considering these differences. Indeed, despite methodological differences, we find that women and teenagers across generations are actively excluding themselves from (technological) activities using gendered discourses of sociability and incompetence. While neither project was explicitly concerned with gender at the outset, it nevertheless emerged though the interview analyses as a central framing device for both generations.

The first project was a four-year interpretive ethnographic investigation (see Ang, 1989: 105) concerned with addressing mediations with gaming technology in domestic contexts in adult shared households. Here, 11 gaming households (households with videogame consoles) were audio recorded, interviewed and filmed while gaming. Along with a questionnaire of over 100 respondents, the research offered insights into the relationship between the

power dynamics of the households and gaming habits. The households included a mix of all male and female, mixed gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity within the UK. Participants were between the ages of 21–35. The female participants represented within this article come from a range of different households. Lorna lived with two male housemates in Brighton; Sara lived with three male housemates in Brighton; Chloe and Clare lived together in an all-female household in London; Jess lived with two male housemates and one female housemate also in Brighton; Hannah lived with one other female housemate and two male housemates in Manchester; Rach lived with a male housemate in Leeds. The data presented below comes from a selection of these households chosen because they exemplify common themes or assertions. Although a more representative geographic spread was initiated (Brighton, Leeds, Belfast and London), clusters grew in certain areas – such as Leeds and Brighton. These households can hardly, then, be considered representative geographically, but the length and duration of interaction (visits would last between 2–5 days over 3–4 years) offers more intensive and personal insights, which a thinner and greater spread of households would not have facilitated. The data drawn on in this article emerges from the interviews with the households, which was analysed using an interpretive ethnographic framework and in relation to the aims of the project as whole. As suggested, although gender was not an initial overt consideration, it quickly emerged as a framing device not only in terms of the power politics of each household, but also in terms of the negotiations women gamers entered into in order to articulate (pleasurable) gaming, and participate in the activities of gaming. The final issue to note here is that these households included frequent, and skilled, gamers (over 20 hrs a week).¹

The second project draws on initial results from ongoing research looking at teenage user generated content (UGC) through a BBC initiative called ‘Blast’ which incorporates online facilities (a website with message boards, content showcases and ‘how to’ sections) and offline facilities (UK-wide local workshops). Overall, the research project addressed constructions of the teenage ‘digital native’ and the corresponding considerations of the teenagers themselves, regarding technological interest and competency. In a similar vein to the first project, interviews were analysed in relation to the themes of the project as a whole, using interpretive ethnography as a framework. The major concern of the interviews was to ascertain the pleasurable elements of the workshops generally, as well as the levels of technological competence. In relation to the former, teenagers were asked for motivational justifications for attending particular workshops, what they had enjoyed about their session, and if they had been surprised at all. In relation to the latter aim, teenagers were asked about their own conception of technological ability following observations during the workshop sessions. The interviews represented here are from teenagers using the *offline* facilities. The BBC Blast initiative offers local workshops aimed at 13–19 year olds, which occur at a variety of locations every year between April and October. The workshops run over a 2–4 day

period and teenagers are invited to participate through the website, schools, parents, youth centres and other local initiatives. The aim of the workshops is to offer 'disenfranchised' teenagers the chance to explore and experiment with new technology in creative and innovative ways. Workshops include DJ-ing and VJ-ing (mixing sound and video), games design, stop-animation, radio, film and music production workshops as well as less technologically orientated workshops such as fashion, drama and dance. Unlike the adult gamers, the teenagers are not necessarily technologically knowledgeable (despite presumptions that all teenagers have some sort of 'natural' technological aptitude, see Thornham and McFarlane, *forthcoming* 2011) and many were participating for the first time in activities they had never heard of before. Group interviews (between 4–10 people) occurred throughout the UK between 2007 and 2009 (Telford, Salford, Leeds, Glasgow, Scunthorpe, Portrush, Belfast, London South Bank, Bristol, Derry, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Great Yarmouth, Liverpool) and were audio recorded. Workshops were observed, and discussions during workshops were recorded.

Although there are difficulties in comparing two different projects, the purpose of such a comparison is to highlight the similarities *in the face of* such differences. In terms of context, adult gaming occurred in the home, with familiar housemates in the context of a leisure/pleasure activity. Teenage workshops were also with known peer groups, but these were combinations of school and out-of-school groups. The workshops themselves were learning environments, and although the extracts here emerge from the afternoons when teenagers left the workshops to do their own recordings, the context is clearly different. Finally, the adult women share living spaces with their housemates, their knowledge is much more intimate. The teenagers, however (as the extracts below suggest), rely much more on wider stereotypes to construct, imagine and perform social relations. Some of these differences are partially accounted for in the representation of the data, which is biased towards the adult women. However, it should be noted that although we could have concentrated on one data set, it is the cross-generational similarities in the performances and articulations which make this data so profound, not least for what it suggests about wider gender construction and potential mediations with technology.

Aside from obvious differences (the technology itself, age, location, methodology), the major contrast in terms of interpreting the data is that while the interviews, observations and recordings of the adult women occurred over prolonged periods of time, the interviews, observations and recordings of the teenagers had a maximum duration of three days. This meant that while the adult women often offered their own reflections and comments on past gaming habits and preference against which we could measure our own interpretation, the teenage girls were not afforded the same level of reflexivity. In many respects, this means that the similarities became apparent precisely because of the adult women gaming project, which offered a conceptual framework for understanding the comments and articulations of the teenagers. Consequently,

this article starts with the adult women and draws connections and comparisons with the teenage population rather than vice versa. While this may produce questions about the epistemological status of the data, we feel such a comparison of two different projects raises profound questions about the construction of normative gender today, across generations, across space, and across research projects.

Considering these caveats, what are the similarities we wish to draw attention to? The first relates to the gendered 'cover stories' both women and teenagers offer regarding the technology. Both groups construct an initial position of exclusion from which to speak. This excluded position relates to an evocation of an 'essential' notion of femininity and what is notable is that *both* groups (despite age, geographic, actual technological ability or knowledge, class, and ethnic differences) construct themselves as gendered and as (therefore) excluded. The second similarity relates to the subsequent construction of the normative users of the technology as male. Both groups construct the male users as technologically competent and active but also stereotype them as excessive and nerdy. This suggests a more nuanced position than simply or straightforwardly one of exclusion particularly because (as we argue) it betrays engagement and interest. Indeed, in constructing the normative user in such a way, the women and teenagers oscillate between distance and engagement in a manner very similar to what Hilary Radner has termed processes of 'scattering' (1995, 131–3). Finally, both groups ultimately find themselves in positions where admissions of interest or knowledge in the new media they discuss become untenable, and where claims of technological and *social* agency become problematic. The implications of these stories of engagement with technology therefore go far beyond future mediations with technology. In positioning themselves as subjected to the more active agencies of co-gamers or co-users, their social agency is undermined and more traditional, gendered, power dynamics re-emerge.

Positions of exclusion: adult gamers

Although traditional gendered stereotypes re-emerge in the complex performances and negotiations we discuss below, they are also overtly stated in the initial discussions of games by the adult women gamers. Preference for particular games and the consequent pleasure each game affords is aligned, in the extracts below, with a proclaimed gendered position. One of the most frequent assertions by the adult women gamers was that the games they were playing were games for 'boys'. Lorna, for example, tells me that she doesn't play *Pro Evolution* because 'obviously it's a football game and for the boys'. Chloe tells me she doesn't play *Grand Theft Auto* because 'it's a boy thing' and therefore not for her. In many cases the genre of the game was used as an explanatory tool for distance, and although women claimed these games were not for them, they were nevertheless frequent players of these games. While we have

discussed this oscillation between engagement and distance elsewhere (see Thornham, 2008, 132–3), what is important for this article is the overt evocation of gender as the premise on which exclusion is based. As suggested above, the recourse to a more essential gender as an explanatory tool is a common trope of post feminism, where gender difference is celebrated and claimed as empowering (see Tasker and Negra, 2007, 3). And as we see from the continued discussions below, the position of exclusion articulated by the women subsequently frames their descriptions of pleasurable and actual engagement, leaving them subject to the directions and desires of other housemates. In both accounts below it seems that once the women have claimed a position of exclusion based on gender, they must continue to perform femininity – here as indecisive, open to critique and tentatively discussing preference.

If I started playing a game, Joe would basically describe what to do . . . so he'd be like 'you've got to press that to do that' and I actually scored one of the best scores that he's ever seen anyone score in [Pro Evolution]. But my favourite game, and I think Leah will agree, is 'Parappa the Rappa' [looks at Leah who does not respond] actually it's not my favourite, its one of my favourites. Mario World, Mario . . . we actually played a good game round my brother's house. My brother's actually an animator for computer games, so he's always got an array, a vast array of games to choose from. And he had a really good game that was a, what was it 'Wario'? Or something. A Wario based game. And its all like little games put together, and you know really *simple* games, but they're about 5 seconds long and . . . it explains like at the beginning like 'go across' and you have to like jump across something, and you know it's just a series of games that you'd go on you know next level and next level. That was better (Lorna, 30)

If you lot disappeared now I'd turn [Grand Theft Auto] off and watch the TV or put a DVD on or something. I need people there to play the playstation anyway. I don't put it on, on my own and definitely not GTA. If I was on my own, I'd turn it off. It's a boy thing, GTA, it's for boys and, well, you'll play [to visiting male friend] on your own because you can do it. But it's not for me. I can't do it. (Chloe, 27)

Both Lorna and Chloe are actively (and frequently) playing these games – alone and with housemates – but despite this, the position they both speak from, and indeed this happened time and time again, is a position of *exclusion*. Both games are for boys – not for them – and while this could be read as an assertion of independence, both women cement their position of exclusion by undermining their own gaming abilities or agency. By comparison to Lorna's 'simple' preference, the implication is that her brother and partner engage in more complex and lengthy gaming. Chloe claims she 'can't do' GTA, and cites this as one reason for never initiating gameplay. Both women discuss gaming through reference to the male figures in their lives. Again, although their

citation of game titles and genres could be read as an attempt to claim a position as a discerning consumer and gamer, in constructing the normative gamer as male, they also articulate, if not create, a power relationship during gaming whereby they are always-already less competent, less enthusiastic, than the male gamers they game with ('Joe would . . . describe what to do', 'you'll play on your own because you can do it . . . I can't do it').

Also notable here, however, are the performative aspects of femininity. Lorna discusses her favourite games, but becomes increasingly vague ('actually it's not my favourite') when she refers to Leah and gets no response. Indeed, when Leah does not respond with a positive affirmation, Lorna quickly offers alternatives. Her assertiveness over her own pleasure quickly turns into tentative choice, which then needs validating by other housemates. In a similar manner to Cassell and Jenkins (1998: 19) research on young girls and games, the adult women also seem to be responding by saying *what they think they're supposed to say*. It is the power dynamics of the immediate social context, which is noticeable here, carefully negotiated by both Lorna and Chloe. Indeed, while the overt gendered proclamation of exclusion is nuanced by these further explanations, we nevertheless continue to see careful distinctions being created between male and female gamers. Regardless of where the distinction is created – along lines of simplicity and complexity, inability and ability, or social and solo gaming – the key point here seems to be in the creation of a distinction, which, through the construction of normative gaming as male, is ascribed gendered overtones.

Indeed, Jess takes this gender dynamic even further in her explanation of the genre of the platform game, telling me that it's the design of the games that accommodate 'natural' masculine characteristics – perseverance and competitiveness – over what she sees as a more feminine aptitude of navigation and compromise. It is the game itself that excludes her:

The guys will carry on going and carry on going until they kill the monster, whereas girls will do it for a while and then think 'well isn't there another thing I could do?' and then go around and see if there's a side chapter² or something else. It's just not for girls; it's not designed for girls. (Jess, 24)

In Jess' account above, then, we not only see the construction of a gendered behaviour, we also see the invocation of a progression narrative whereby the hero (the male gamer) continues along the linear route to the ultimate goal (see de Lauretis, 1984: 119; Clough, 1992: 17–18). As Jess suggests, faced with the option of progressing linearly (*properly* in terms of the logic of the platform game), the only alternative is a more circular or exploratory route, where experience and exploration for the sake of it, rather than progression, is prioritised. This is both an alternative to a linear progression, and an alternative to the notion of exploration. It is not domination or ownership of place or space that Jess seeks, but *experience*. Jess' comments resonates de Lauretis' work on narrative, particularly in terms of how Jess constructs the fantasy ideal

gamer as the one who *does* progress linearly, kill the monster, and reach the end of the level. As de Lauretis reminds us, this hero (along with the narrative of progress, reason and logic) not only has roots in the Enlightenment, it is also highly gendered.

[T]he single figure of the hero who crosses the boundary and penetrates the other space. . . . In so doing the hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and as male. he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. (de Lauretis, 1984: 119)

The *female* gamer, on the other hand and as Jess articulates, is positioned outside this narrative structure. She is neither the 'other' to the hero (as de Lauretis suggests – the 'topos, matrix and matter' (ibid.) to be penetrated and owned) because (albeit a problematic) agency and choice *have* been demonstrated in the choice of genre, in the tentative moves towards pleasure, and in the activity of gaming in which the women engage. Nor does Jess feel able to claim the same desires and objectives as the gaming hero. Instead, she constructs the difference as a 'natural' exclusion and difference, and consequently seems to seek out more rhizomatic routes (of gaming side routes) over linear progression ('girls will . . . go around and see if there's a side chapter'). On one level, then, this is a recourse to narrative, to authorship and to potential disruptions to existing narrative structures. We could claim it as a post-feminist declaration of agency. Jess is actively disrupting the structure of the game and claiming agency in that disruption. However, the initial choice she makes is once again that of exclusion, as outside the norms. Further, the choice Jess makes is insistently a personal one; it is premised, not on a critique of the gaming structures, but on a gendered negotiation within them. The only choice she can make, within these parameters, is based on a personal (non-political, micro) decision relating to her own pleasure and desire. In this sense, Jess's comments may be a claim of agency and authorship, but in keeping with Thornham 2007 and Arthurs 2003, this is an insistently non-political, personal, and limited authorship.

Teenage exclusions

These claims to, and of, an initial position of exclusion in relation to technology and genre were also, as suggested, a frequent iteration for the teenagers involved in the digital media workshops run by the BBC. Indeed, the comments they offered on their choice of workshop demonstrate a similar rhetoric of exclusion based on the fact that they're girls. Along with the usual claims of disinterest ('VJ-ing is more for the boys', 'it's more for the boys [game workshop] that though'), which seem to map almost exactly onto the comments of the adult women gamers, teenagers seem to go one step further and explicitly connect technological inability or incompetence with gender. Many

explanations of exclusion included the phrase ‘I’m such a *girl*’, which was clearly meant as a disparaging comment on technological abilities. One girl who had attended a radio production workshop told me she didn’t find it that enjoyable because, as she suggested, ‘I can’t work the dials! I’m rubbish at it. He [her friend] was like, “you’re rubbish!” I’m *such* a girl!’ Here her own incompetence articulated through the phrase ‘I’m *such* a girl’ was noted by her (male) friend and acquiesced to. While we are not suggesting that gender and technological competence are in any way related, what was notable with the teenagers was the easy slippage from genre exclusion to technological incompetence, and the fact that both claims were overtly premised on the fact that they were ‘girls’.

Indeed, in some senses this finding maps onto much earlier ethnographic work investigating gender and domestic technology, where women expressed similar inadequacies or self-deprecation when it came to technological knowledge and ability. Ann Gray, for example, researching the use of videocassette recorders in the home, found that women consciously or unconsciously remained ignorant of the ‘workings of the VCR’ (1992: 169), and that this had repercussions for them later (Gray, 1992: 164–80). Considering these similarities in terms of the proclaimed position of exclusion – and wider ethnographic research investigating gender and technology – such parallels could be read not only as a ‘stylised repetition of acts’ (Butler, 1990: 179) across generations but also, perhaps more worryingly, in relation to the sustainability or sedimentation of some ‘acts’ which work, over time, to produce normative hegemonic behaviour (Butler, 1990: 171–80).

However, as with the adult women, when we explore the explanations the teenagers offer in more detail – particularly in relation to their explanations of the workshops they *did* attend – we see that the proclaimed position of incompetence (‘I’m *such* a girl’) is actually very carefully negotiated. This suggests that in many ways the notion of them being ‘just a girl’ (like the adult women gamers claimed position of exclusion) is also functioning as cover story, masking potential negotiated positionalities and engagements which may actually be pleasurable. Indeed, as we see below, technological knowledge may be derided when it comes to games programming, but it is celebrated when it comes to deconstructing clothes. This suggests that it is not technological competence *per se* that is problematic, but rather that there is a careful negotiation around what *kinds* of technological competence are admissible. The careful distinction offered below is not only gendered in the distinction between the games workshop (nerdy, male) and the fashion workshop (useful, female); it is also gendered in terms of what aspects the fashion workshop supports (individuality, ethical issues, recycling). It is here, arguably, that the post-feminist subject begins to emerge.

G1. It’s not that I’m not into games just not the nerdy side. Like I’ve got a DS, but I’m not going to the programming [workshop] no way

Interviewer. So which workshop did you go to then?

G1. The fashion one

Interviewer. Okay. Can you describe what you've been doing?

G2. We've been deconstructing clothes, and then we've been putting them back together and customising them. But everyone here, we all done raw textiles and textile projects

G4. We made clothes and stuff

G3. It's been good coz like we can't really afford to buy new stuff, but this way we've learning how to customise our own things and re-use clothes not just throw them away

G1. it's like ethical fashion as well, you re-use stuff

G4. I'd never really thought about redesigning clothes either, like you buy something and it doesn't fit, it doesn't fit. But this way, you change it. It makes the clothes more individual (London workshop, 15 yr olds)

In the extract above, we see knowledge and interest claimed in the fashion and textile workshop instead of the games workshop. According to the teenagers cited above, fashion encourages self-expression, individuality and practicality. These are concepts pitted against the games workshop where the more universal and ambiguous term 'nerd' demonstrates the precise opposite to the concept of the 'individual'. The post-feminist discourses of consumerism, individuality and choice are emphasised here (see McRobbie, 2009: 1), and given a practical and everyday lens. Fashion offers the means to express yourself *and* gain control over your finances. The post-feminist qualities of 'cultural and economic freedom' (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 12) are refashioned quite literally here in relation to individual appearance. Such qualities, as McRobbie argues, are 'converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and . . . are deployed in this guise' (McRobbie, 2009: 1).

If the teenagers seem to articulate a relatively transparent, post-feminist discourse of individuality, consumerism and choice as motivational reasons for engagement in the workshops, the adults offer a more nuanced discourse, perhaps more aligned with McRobbie's argument that post feminism emphasizes feminism 'taken into account' (2007, 28). While we continue to see a personal discourse here, there is an element of criticism offered particularly around the stereotyped figure of the avatars. However, even here, criticism is aligned with their position as consumers. The women gamers, in keeping with Aphra Kerr's research (see Kerr, 2003), argue that although they may find the avatars, genres or technology offensive, it would impede their gameplay minimally.

Sara. I think it's more marketed at boys and I guess that could change. Just how, the way it looks has been blokey, black, sleek machine sat in the corner of the room bursting entrails of wires. And the games are more blokey [pause]

Interviewer. So are you, I mean you said *Micro Machines* was good because you get to be a woman as well

Sara. yeah (laughs)

Interviewer. is that important to you?

Sara. it's not hugely important but it does suggest that maybe the makers have thought that it appeals to boys and girls. I mean you can't be a woman on GTA or whatever and something like Lara Croft is just designed to be a male fantasy figure (laughs at herself). Yeah I guess it does matter to me. I wouldn't want to play Lara Croft I just think she's so wrong. And I always choose the woman thing on Micro Machines (laughs)

Hannah. I actually find the female characters quite offensive. Like, I'd not say it to Simon who has got all the games, but the Final Fantasy women and Lara Croft – you know what I mean? All these games with skinny, tiny kick-ass women, they're supposed to be liberating. They just annoy me

Interviewer. would it stop you playing the game?

Hannah. I'd probably play – just to keep Simon happy. I wouldn't buy it though.

There are a number of ways we can read these comments. The first relates to performative concepts of femininity. there is clearly a disjuncture between what they say and do here, when their criticism does not frame decisions to play that game. This first reading echoes much research around the performative aspects of femininity (for example Butler, 1990; Ang and Hermes, 1991; Gray, 1992), which suggests performativity is embedded in socio-cultural structures and depends very much on 'who is imagining whom' (Butler, 2004: 10). Indeed, Sara laughs self-consciously when she makes more critical claims, softening their effect and undermining the authority with which she makes them. Hannah makes it clear that while she is critical of the female avatars of *Final Fantasy* and *Tomb Raider*, she would not voice these opinions to her male housemate. Both housemates are very aware of the context in which they are speaking, offering perhaps contradictory comments as they negotiate the social arena.

The second interpretation relates to the emphasis placed on housemates and peers. Like Chloe's comments above, the gamers emphasize appeasement and care of their housemates and friends over their own criticism of the games. Both of these comments continue to enforce the rhetoric of sensitivity to other housemates. They also acknowledge the problematic construction of the visual and verbal discourse of gaming ('black sleek machine') and the avatars ('skinny, tiny' 'so wrong') but both gamers either laugh at the suggestion this could influence reaction (and undermine and dismiss this notion) or claim it would not prevent gaming. And, as suggested, the criticisms are offered from the position of a consumer, where, in keeping with the post-feminist tradition, economic choice and freedom can be exercised. However, ultimately, although criticism is offered, both gamers emphasize the limited impact such opinions would have on gameplay, suggesting perhaps that in the end, as McRobbie argues.

The new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of her critique is a condition of her freedom. (McRobbie, 2004: 260)

Finally, then, we could read these comments in relation to McRobbie's concept of 'feminism taken into account'. This is perhaps the most sceptical reading, where a more 'feminist' critique is offered by the gamers, but then subsequently dismissed in the articulation of more traditional feminine qualities. Talking from a position as consumer allows the women to offer a critique of the women avatars, genre and technology. However, such criticisms are carefully bracketed with proclamations about normative gaming practices to suggest that, although the images were problematic, they wouldn't necessarily prevent gameplay. In turn this works to undermine any connection to a feminist politics, because it frames such statements as individual and personal reflections with limited power to affect actual gaming dynamics. The criticism of the constructed and unrepresentative images of women in the media, does, on the one hand, reiterate one of the successes of feminism. Indeed, as Rosalind Gill suggests, one of the initial aims of feminism was to criticise the 'idealized, perfect images of unattainable femininity' (2007: 74). On the other hand, we can also see the discourse of post feminism at work here, in the simultaneous acknowledgement and (political) dismissal of such critiques.

Social cover stories and performances

What is noticeable about all the responses cited above across generations is the reference to the *social*, or more specifically, friends and housemates. If the first cover story the women and girls offer is a position of initial exclusion based on their (essential, simplified) gender, then the second cover story is a positioning which places the women and teenagers primarily in social relationships. In a similar vein to the teenagers cited above (and below), these articulations prioritize friends, peers and social scenarios, variously constructing the women and teenagers as appeasing and socially concerned individuals, which, as Beverley Skeggs argues is an important facet of 'feminine cultural capital' (1997: 72). Indeed, the adult women gamers frequently refer to, evoke, and situate themselves in relation to, other housemates in their description of the games they're playing, emphasising housemates' presence and importance to the gameplay. In the extract quoted earlier in the article, Lorna talks about Joe's instruction, saying that he would tell her what to do even if she did play Pro Evolution, and Sara goes even further when she suggests that the *very reason* for her gaming is actually to integrate herself socially with her housemates.

They're always telling me what to do. But that's boys isn't it? They have to instruct you . . . its how I *choose* to bond with my housemates, but it doesn't change how I interact with them. I'm still 'the Girl' to them and don't know what I'm doing. (Sara, 27)

In both these accounts by Lorna and Sara (and we can also situate Jess's and Hannah's comments here), the competitive aims of the game are downplayed, and the emphasis is continually on interaction with housemates. While this could indicate simple preference towards social gaming scenarios, the deference given to male housemates – in terms of initiating gaming, and in terms of knowledge of the game and performance during gameplay (see below) – suggests that this is more than a straightforward articulation of gaming preference. Indeed, while some of the women gamers did game alone occasionally, in general women gamers played in social groups and they rarely initiated gaming. In turn, social gaming creates different power dynamics, and, as we will see further below, performances of femininity continue to be played out here.

The teenage girls also consistently prioritise the importance and influence of their friends in deciding what to do and which workshops to go to. It was far more important for them to demonstrate a shared interest with their friends rather than going to a workshop they were interested in, which could label them a 'nerd' or, worse, a social 'widow' (complete with connotations of abandonment and powerlessness). Indeed, many of the teenagers suggested that they would have liked to have attended a different workshop, but in the end made a decision based on the desire of the group.

G1. I was just following these two. I wanted to do VJ-ing but then I saw all those boys and thought 'No way!'

G3. I wanted to do Street Dance but I didn't want to be a widow.

Interviewer. So why did you go to this workshop then?

G1. Coz our friend wanted to go

G2. I like radio and the music best so we're gonna come back and do the radio one tomorrow, listen to some tunes

For *both* the teenage girls and adult women, then, it is housemates or friends that are consistently prioritized. Friends not only initiate engagement, they also decide what to engage with and frame subsequent engagement. Further, as Valerie Walkerdine has suggested (2006), the characteristics, concerns, and traits they consistently outline as inherently important to their mediations with technology, are those traditionally associated with the feminine. Furthermore, it is a femininity that, in a similar vein to the findings of Walkerdine's recent research (2006, 2007), and in keeping with wider ethnographic research into new technology in the home (for example, Gray, 1992, and Skeggs, 1997), emphasizes their role as the carer and the appeaser. Both the adult women and

teenagers seem to offer a further cover story, one that positions them as socially concerned individuals. Here, they suggest that it is more important to appease friends and housemates than direct their own pleasure. Our argument is that this ultimately reproduces a dichotomy, which sees femininity on one side (ascribed with such qualities as sociality, cooperation and care), and technology on the other (ascribed with competitiveness, aggression, violence, nerdy or geek interest). In both age groups, this dichotomy works (along with their own assertions) to distance the women and teenage girls from the technology, from the logics and rationale of the game (winning, competitiveness) or workshop (becoming adept and technologically knowledgeable). It also works to refigure the technology into a *social* setting where friends or housemates *can* be prioritised.

The prioritisation of the social and friends was notable during the workshops as well. In the account below, a security guard challenges the group for taking photos of the surrounding areas and buildings. The confrontation is recounted moments later by the group. Here, the technological ineptitude of the teenage girl is refigured into the social encounter with the security guard and ultimately produces female photographer as the saviour of the group. Her lack of technological ability gets them out of a potentially sticky situation when she discovers she has fortuitously failed to save any of her images on the digital camera.

G1. We was [sic] in the multi storey car park and right at the top and we was [sic] supposed to be taking photos of, like, the surroundings and um, we were starting going down the stairs and like taking photos of the images down the stairs and of the stairs coz they were cool and, um, we sort of got told . . . to . . . leave

G2. Yeah

[Laughter]

G3. But then when they saw that we were like, well then they said we can stay but just 'don't take any photos of residential areas'. But I tried to show her what I done just the area. But then it was *blank!*

[Laughter]

G3. I'm such a *girl* when it comes to technology! But it totally worked coz there was nothing to show! (Scunthorpe workshop, 14 yr olds)

The realisation that she failed to save any of her photographed images (and has therefore wasted her time *and* is technologically inept) comes hand in hand with the realisation that she has successfully avoided any confrontation with the security guard and her technological incompetence has actually benefitted the group. It is an account that constructs her as the accidental saviour in a social confrontation because of her technological ineptitude. Her comment 'I'm such a girl' is less a criticism of herself, and more a statement, which allows her to claim credit for the scenario working in the groups' favour ('it totally worked'). Further, if we return briefly to the

adult women gamers, the practice of gaming does not resolve issues around social appeasement: it brings them to the fore particularly around notions of performance.

Sara. I've made a complete arse of this! Oh it is excruciating!

[laughter]

Sara. I thought it was a bike and it was a man!

[laughter]

Ian. oh dear. I don't like that. Come on! You're going to die!! Quick! Quick!

Sara. this is the least amount of fun I've ever had.

[gunfire]

Clare. got a gun now. Got a gun! Stop! Stop at the traffic lights! [shouting.

Leans forward] Oh. [leans back] Now where's, where do I have to go now?

[angry shouting] Why they hell are you shooting at me? [half out of chair]

I didn't know the police could shoot at me! Where's the? I didn't know they

would just shoot me? [sits back in seat] It's all gone to the dogs. What the

hell? [raising arms in the air. Console loosely held in right hand]

Chloe. Sweet's nearly dead. Ohh. You'll be arrested!

Clare. ohh nooo!

In a similar vein to the teenage account of meeting the security guard, the recordings of gameplay are performances of gaming incompetence. More importantly perhaps, both performances maintain and prioritise interaction with other housemates rather than competitiveness, by keeping everyone in the living room involved in it. In both cases, technological competence seems less favourable than social appeasement.

Conclusions

Taken together, all these quotes from the adult women gamers and teenagers suggest in one way or another (and these are just snapshots over a five year period) that both generations talk from an excluded position of femininity, which allows them to claim a certain kind of knowledge, albeit one where technology seems to have little place. Our argument is that a useful way to think about these articulations is in relation to Negra's concept of a cover story. Indeed, the cover stories are not only overt claims to (a particular kind of) femininity; they also mask the very real oscillations between performances of a more traditional femininity and pleasurable engagement with the technology. They each articulate what Walkerdine has termed the 'habitual "feminine" position of incompetence' (2006: 526) as a particular kind of gendered, normal, feminine *cover story*. Negra's notion of a cover story is useful for this article, because of what it suggests about the negotiations women and teenagers enter into when engaging with what they construct and perceive as a more

'masculine' activity. Further, such claims to and towards femininity, work to produce and shape wider ideologies of femininity, reconfigured here around the post feminist and neo-liberal discourse of *choice*, as well as continuing the traditionally feminine aspects of 'care, co-operation, concern, and sensitivity to others' (see Walkerdine, 2006: 520).

Our argument is that the women and teenagers cited here selectively *evoke* certain aspects of their understandings of a wider popular discourse of post feminism and femininity to stake their claims. On the one hand, this allows them to negotiate social power relations in order to speak about the technology, and potentially *at least* engage with it on some level. While this would be a far more positive conclusion, when we actually investigate the kinds of engagements experienced, we continue to see self-deprecating performances of inability. Consequently, we are far less inclined to interpret these performances in this way. In part, our reluctance comes from the problematic alignment of a post-feminist discourse of choice and consumerism, which continues to frame potential pleasures and engagements in more traditionally gendered ways. It is also because such performances and articulations are not new; they have been noted in much (feminist) ethnographic research investigating (new) media consumption (for example Gray, 1992; Silverstone, Morley and Hirsch, 1992) along with more contemporary research into new media (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Carr *et al.*, 2006; Walkerdine, 2007). Similarly, in keeping with wider research investigating the performances of women in other traditional 'masculine' environments, we also find that masculinity and femininity become contentious, crucial, and continually negotiated concepts (see Cox and Thompson, 2000; George, 2005; Walkerdine, 2006). Performances or stories are processes of continual self-evaluation, which are 'fundamentally forged through social interaction' (George, 2005: 340), and such performances are layered with gendered implications.

The double bind of authority being grounded in a problematic essential and embodied notion of femininity, which simultaneously allows the women and teenagers some autonomy to speak about the technology, but also then frames any subsequent articulations, means that these articulations become much more than just a cover story because they end up not only reclaiming, but also *rearticulating* traditional notions of femininity. One of the consequences of speaking insistently *as women* means that the women and teenagers modify potential political identities into personal ones, and their frameworks of pleasure into considerations of the social arena. In either scenario, it is (an insistently non political, post-feminist) individual choice that becomes premised. Power resides in the ability to author that choice but not necessarily direct it, and the only criticism that seems to emerge is through a claimed position of consumer. Even here, criticism rarely impacts onto actual engagement because it is not conducive to social considerations. We can see resonances of post feminism throughout the accounts here, both in terms of what is articulated, and the positions from which they are made.

Such claims are problematic not only because they cover over what are potentially pleasurable experiences, but also because they are never *just* cover stories. They also produce and sustain the limitations and boundaries for the kinds of possible relations, pleasures, and mediations with technology that these women and girls *can* experience, not least because they are consistently producing and performing gendered roles of sensitivity to others and aligning this in certain cases with technological ineptitude. They are not just cover stories; they are active productions of a more traditional femininity that is then embodied and reaffirmed through praxis. Indeed, as Judith Butler suggests, it is the repetitiveness of praxis, which legitimates and normalises such performances:

[T]he action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; *and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation* (1990, 178 my italics)

Although in one sense the claims and performances of the women and teenagers enable normative (carefully regimented) engagement with technology through the construction of a place to speak from (as excluded) and in so doing disparage the 'nerdy' people who can use and engage with the technology, they nevertheless reproduce the ideal user of technology as always-already male (see, for example de Lauretis, 1984; Grosz, 2001). This reaffirms and produces technology, and mediations with it, as gendered, and ultimately reinforces the excluded position initially articulated by the women and teenagers. Finally, the fact that these claims, practices and disarticulations occur across geographical space and, perhaps more importantly, across generations is indicative of how pervasive and problematic such cover stories and performances have come to be. The comments that the women and teenagers offer may be within the context of new technology, but they also, and perhaps most importantly, articulate shifting multi-generational discourses of femininity. Although these seem premised on post-feminist and neo-liberal discourses of choice, what ultimately re-emerges are more traditional concepts of 'care, co-operation, concern, and sensitivity to others' (2006: 520).

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Notes

- 1 Although some of the comments could be read as suggesting the women gamed only in social situations and only in the context of the particular household, it should be noted that they were all lifelong gamers who recounted long histories of mediations with gaming technology (videogames, PC games and handhelds).

2 Platform games like Final Fantasy have ‘side chapters’ alongside the major ones. these are alternative tasks or missions a player can undergo in order to enhance certain skills, to gain more money, or to discover information which will improve their chances in the rest of the game.

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