Teach Them All!

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TEACH THEM ALL

I - Introduction

In France, public schools are mixed. But co-education of boys and girls, however, is not easy. Currently, the curricula are based on an official text published in 2006: the common core of knowledge and skills [1]. It urges teachers to teach, among other things, respect for others (civility, tolerance, rejection of prejudice and stereotypes) and respect for the other sex. The theme is important, but, in the opinion of most teachers, difficult to address in class.

During the twentieth century, using games became a teaching method. However, if teaching through play is now a common and legitimate practice, teaching the game is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, the common core of knowledge and skills has required from teachers that they educate children to understand the media and teach using media and technology.

An idea: bring together two difficulties to solve a problem! Educating gender through video games, and vice versa! I will present my work in two stages:
1) An analysis of gender discourse conveyed by a certain category of video games.
2) Some leads to work from this category of games, and with pupils, on gender.

II - Combat video games: female images, male images

A - A specific corpus

Among all the available video games, I chose to work on action games, fighting games. I chose these games because they offer the player to embody human avatars and because their reputation puts them a priori as the antithesis of all learning. A kind of bet! I worked from all the demo CD PS1, PS2 and PS3 published in France between 1995 and 2009 and examined 44 fighting games.

B - My method

1) References

My work is a continuation of that initiated in 2000 by J. Cassell and H. Jenkins [2]. It also extends to research of M. Marriott [3] and M. Consalvo [4].

2) Quantitive analysis of the number of men and women

Combat games belong to the category of simulation games. With the exception of wresting games, it is to be noticed that they only propose male characters. Those belonging to the category of arcade games always let the player the possibility to choose to embody a man or a woman.The more recent the game is, the greater choice one has. 27 % of the characters directed in the games published for PS1 (1995-2000) were women. The number has grown with PS2 (2000-2005) and PS3 (2005-2009), reaching 33%. This phenomenon can be internally observed within the series themselves.

3) Analysis of the identity cards of the gaming characters

At first sight a kind of equality seems to be the rule concerning the onomastic treatment of feminine and masculine characters. However, the first names chosen, whether real or imaginary, always point out to the character's gender.

The characters' identification files mention almost in every case the protagonists' age. For women, the figure is systematically between 19 and 22. In some cases, the mention « no data » seems to pertain to some virtual coquetry. In combat games the girls are always young. You will never see a mature woman fighter or an old woman fighter. The average age is comparatively higher for men (26). Some fighters are bald, some are going grey at the temples, others are white-haired. Ageing seems to be a male privilege.

Size, weight and measurements of protagonists, boys and girls, are also mentioned. The figures look very much like ideal runway models. These allegedly perfect proportions are perhaps suitable for a model but certainly do not correspond to a woman fighter's physique. Besides, from a sporting viewpoint, only gender and weight are taken into account. What good is it to know the waist, the hip and the bust measurements of one's adversary? One may object that this data is also present in the male characters' files. But why bother about waist, hip and chest measurements for a sportsman! We can suppose that if men are submitted to the same treatment as women, it is above all in order to legitimate the presence of this information concerning women…

Last but not least: combat style. If one refers to their files, female characters are attributed styles using the redirection of energy or guile while the male characters are attributed more 'brute force' style. But beyond this interpretation, it is obvious that women practice martial arts which are, with a few exceptions, more obscure than those practiced by male characters. As if girls were unable to win a contest when practicing an acknowledged style. As if they had to turn to different, rare or strange styles.

4) Audiovisual analysis of body types, clothing, gestures and attitudes.

a) Virile men

The combat game heroes' common bodies are athletic ones. All of them are conceived more or less on the same developed pattern: broad-shouldered, with protruding pectoral, abdominal muscles and huge biceps. Clothes worn by the combatants are varied according to shape and fabric. They are set in all tints except pink. Besides

traditional combat dress one finds devices meant to protect the body or facilitate its movements. Jackets are very often sleeveless. They are worn open and next to the skin, which allows the combatant to display torso and arms.

But what about the way bodies move? We have observed two types of gestures: sporting, coherent, generally well led gestures and others, improbable or too acrobatic to be realistic. In either case, our heroes are endowed with all the qualities which make good combatants: steady positions, powerfulness, an excellent spring.

In combat games, whether in terms of physique or dress, everything seems to be called up to valorize men's bodies and assert their virility.

b) Mannish women

Men being caricatures of virility, one expects women in the same way to be caricatures of femininity, therefore to wear no element connoting masculinity whatsoever. This is not quite the case. Even though they definitely appear as women, they take on the same objectives as their male counterparts, behave in the same way when confronted with problems, and solve these problems in the same way. They give blows, they receive some. As if a woman were merely a man in a woman's body.

c) Feminine men

Considering what we have just written, it seems uneasy to evoke femininity, even though stereotyped, regarding the video games combatants. Considering the size of their wardrobes, shouldn't we consider their attention to good looks as surprising? Some recent games display a « creation » mode which allows modification of the hero's physical appearance and provides a choice of garments one by one, from shoes to hat and underwear. The range of choice is equivalent for men and women. We must note here that combat games, under cover of fight, allow boys to play with their dolls.

Soul Calibur III. (Namco. 2005). Screenshot.

d) Feminine women

The virtual combatants' bodies display shapes in relation with their measurements. Hips, breasts and buttocks they do have. Sexual ambiguity is not the matter. All are built according to an identical canon: long-legged and wasp-waisted. Only faces change, somewhat the way Barbie dolls' faces do. Combat games offer thus a unique and simplifying model to contemplate. In this, they are far from being innovating!

The women combatants' wardrobe is rather well furnished, from dresses and skirts open to the waist, slacks and shorts peculiarly tight, tank tops and close-fitting bras. Colours are generally showy, shapes often eccentric and the matching frequently daring.

All these garments have one thing in common. They are both sexy and definitely feminine. In combat games, unisex dresses are banned. Shapes mould bodies and valorize them. They even show, locally, nude skin, arms, legs, navel.

These garments are otherwise typically unsuitable. Unlike men, women are not favored with sportswear. They even wear dress rather unfit with the activity they are required to assume. For instance, how adequate is practising martial arts with a long dress?

Previously, the female characters were, in fighting games, swift, supple and weak. Today, they are swift, supple and powerful and can fight as equals with their male counterparts.

However, everything concurs to bias the player towards contemplating the sportswomen' movements and those movements are, to a great extent, alien to sport. Attitudes, movements and gestures put on stage are often suggestive, if not licentious. You go at once from true sport to sport in chamber. Suppleness and acrobatic prowess then assume another dimension, that of an erotic promise. Indeed, chasing the glimpses has long pertained to the pleasure of these games.

Tekken 4. (Namco, 2002). Screenshot.

Thus, combat games put on stage erotically characterized gestures involved by sport practices. Generous breasts delineate a movement; an open skirt occasionally unveils a glimpse of an upper thigh; panties are glimpsed through somersault. Heroines unwillingly commit unchaste and exciting gestures. Men and women in these games obviously are not in the same boat. Abdominal muscles excepted, a male character's advantages will never be valorized. This is all that Namco's team, according to Zoe Flower, calls "functional beauty in combat" [5]!

C - My conclusion

As a matter of fact, men and women I encounter in my study are caricatures. But can we speak of sexism for all that?

On the woman side, I answer this question in the affirmative mainly because of the erotic connotations borne solely by the heroines' gestures. Contrary to men, women have been conceived, so it seems, in order to please and

only for that purpose. The player is literally invited to manipulate splendid women as sex objects with his joystick. In the case in point we are exactly confronted with discrimination. Nevertheless, to rest on firmer ground, we have to verify if by chance one can find some egalitarian hints...

Men and women meet, thus defining a place where they practice together an activity traditionally devoted to men. « Shedding blood » is not a male privilege any more [6]. Equality manifests itself thus in opposition. We will not reexamine the virtual women' sporting competences, neither will we their evolution. Let us merely note that they proceeded from weakness to vigor, and that they are from now on respectable and fearsome opponents. This purported « equality » however remains somewhat contrived. From weak to wonder woman, it seems that games creators have gone too fast and too far. Maybe combat games aim at some equality, but they only succeed in putting on stage a certain kind of egalitarianism by negating the differences between men and women.

Finally we must resort to an ultimate parameter: the player. Combat games let girls as well as boys adopt one gender or the other, according to their mood. Each game provides then the opportunity to live up to a punctual transvestism, so much so that the caricatural aspect of male and female representations becomes relative. It even becomes possible to explore the idea of equality, all the more so as one of the purposes of such games is to learn how to master each character's special blow to win. To master the choice of gender is not without consequence, and this may be the site of the contestation of the man-woman bipolarity

III - Ideas for the classroom

The fighting games provide material to work on prejudice and gender stereotypes. Why not use them to learn tolerance and respect for the opposite sex? This proposal is *a priori* quite paradoxical, but not as paradoxical as it may sound. Let us do an experiment. Take a girl, put her in command of a male. Take a boy, put him in command of a female. Let the mixture « brew », then interview! Predict that the debate on gender stereotypes will be richer after this experience than before. For it is one thing to identify and analyze these stereotypes, it is another to live them from within. Many other options are available to teachers:

- Analyze the physical, psychological and social virtual characters set in different types of video games.
- Compare characters' evolution and transformation in other media as well (press, television, cinema).
- Identify in other cultures, the various elements determining the feminine and the masculine: in other words how the feminine and masculine components emerge and combine, elsewhere.
- Create virtual characters that can be either stereotyped, or non-stereotyped, or even put stereotypes into question.
- Imagine interactive stories around these characters.
- Etc...

IV - Conclusion

Teachers in the XXIth century have to learn to consider action video games and their popularity not as necessary evils but as welcome teaching aids. Go from « Beat them all » to « Teach them all »!

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