



UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

Making (a) difference in games

Feminist game creation and other interferences with the Swedish video game industry's reproduction of gendered sameness

University of Gothenburg Faculty of Arts
Department of Cultural Sciences
Master's Thesis in Gendering Practices, 30 hec
Spring 2017
Author: Frida Markendahl
Supervisor: Juan Velasquez

We recognize it only in retrospect, these people who try to change things.

We see them only when change has happened.

Åsa Roos (2016)

Thanks to...

... all the wonderful informants who let me into some parts of their worlds.

... Juan Velasquez for guidance and encouragement when best needed.

... Anna Maria Szczepanska for inspiration and for helping me build my first bridge into this exciting world of game creation.

... my amazing family, friends and partner for always believing in me. I couldn't have done any of this without your love and support. Jag älskar er. Special thanks to my sister Hanna Markendahl for helping me say what I really want to say. You're going to be an amazing teacher.

Abstract

Grounded in my passion for video games and motivated by my experiences of often feeling like not belonging in the stories told in games, this qualitative study investigates challenges and strategies for diversity in games from the perspectives of eight game designers. While feminist game scholars problematize the Swedish video game industry's reproduction of the *same stories* targeted towards the *same players* (white, heterosexual, middle classed and relatively young males), few investigate in and propose directions for the industry to change its practices. By approaching game designers committed to diversity in games, the main aim for this study is therefore to gain knowledge on current processes of change. With social constructivist and posthumanist feminist theories, I diffractively analyze narratives from in-depth interviews, blog posts and panel discussions. The results of this study suggest that the industry has transitioned into an 'openness' towards diversity in games. However, the results also point at this openness as involving repressive practices where differences and diversity are forced into white, middle class, heterosexual and male sameness. Therefore, I argue that the pursuit of sameness works to exclude a diversity of voices from the stories told in games. I also conclude that the participants' diffractive strategies, in how they visualize and allow for differences, create interferences with the industry's reproduction of sameness.

Keywords: Game designers, Swedish video game industry, diversity in games, gendered sameness, diffraction

Contents

1. Introduction	6
1.1 How Things Came to Matter	6
1.2 Scientific Problem and Aim	7
1.3 Contribution to the Field of Gender Studies	9
2. Literature Review	11
2.1 Gaming Bodies and Discourses on Gender Equality	11
2.2 Diversity Through Reflective Practices... and Then What?	12
3. Theoretical Approach	17
3.1 Gender Performativity and Recognizable (Survivable) Subjects: Butler.....	17
3.2 Agential Realism and Diffraction/Reflection: Barad and Haraway	18
3.3 The Feminist Killjoy and Willful Politics: Ahmed	20
3.4 Redemptive Capitalism: Bernstein	22
4. Methodology	24
4.1 Material and Selection.....	24
4.2 Qualitative Methods for Gathering Data: Interviews, Panel Discussion and Blog	28
4.3 Method For Analyzing Data: Diffractive Narrative Inquiry	30
4.4 ... and Other Ethical Considerations.....	32
5. Analysis	34
5.1 The Participants and the Context in Which Knowledge Was Produced	34
5.1.1 Interview: Lois	34
5.1.2 Interview: Idun	34
5.1.3 Interview: Cleo	35
5.1.4 Interview: Meimi.....	35
5.1.5 Panel Discussion: Mimi, Ann and Charlie	36
5.1.6 Blog: “Discordia”	36
5.2 Challenges: The Conditionality of ‘Openness’	37
5.2.1 Introducing the New ‘Openness’ of the Swedish Video Game Industry	37
5.2.2 ‘Openness’ ... on the Condition That Same Bodies Speak and Other Bodies Keep Silent.....	40
5.2.3 ‘Openness’ ... on the Condition That the Same Stories Are Told	45
5.3 Strategies: Interferences With Sameness	50

5.3.1 Separatism: Creating a Feminist Table to Make Difference	51
5.3.2 Negotiate Profitability of Diversity Work.....	53
5.3.3 Diffractive Storytelling Practices in Game Design	55
6. Conclusions and Further Remarks.....	61
7. References	65

1. Introduction

1.1 How Things Came to Matter

As a child, I absolutely loved playing video games. We were four sisters, and I was the one interested in playing video games and doing sports. I was told by my surroundings that this made me ‘the boy in the family’. I remember taking so much pride in this, being my parents’ ‘almost son’.

As a middle-classed kid with two working parents, I was privileged to get access to the consumer culture of video games. When my family bought Nintendo 64, the outside world no longer seemed that interesting to me. At least not as interesting and fun as the world of Super Mario, Donkey Kong and Super Smash Bros. In the weekends, I used to run over to my neighbor friends, who also had the console, so that we could play the games that I did not have myself.

The day we got our first computer in the house, the possibilities in gaming seemed unlimited. My thirst for exploring games grew bigger and bigger by the day. I remember sitting by the computer and time went by as never before. Minutes felt like seconds and hours felt like minutes. I felt as if I was living a double life, and it felt truly amazing. I just could not seem to get enough of my second life.

However, as I grew older, all of this changed. I reached an age where it was no longer understood as something positive to be a ‘boyish girl’. At least not when it came to playing video games. One proof of this was that I suddenly found myself without any female friends playing video games. My relationship to games slowly turned from something lovely and easy, to something complicated associated with emotions of shame. Somewhere along the way, I started hiding my gaming interest from friends and people at school. Then one day, I stopped playing entirely.

For the seven years to come, I never entered the worlds of gaming that I as a child and young woman fell so much in love with. During this time, I thought of my gaming years as a chapter in my life that was naturally left to my childhood. But when a new person was introduced to my life, something happened. This person had a completely different life story where gaming had been a big part of his life ever since he was a child. On the contrary to me, he had never stopped playing and seemed to have an easier relationship to games. This made me wanting to

explore why my relationship had turned so complicated when it seemed like it had started the same way as it had done for him.

I started playing again, although not at all to the same extent as when I was younger. I enjoyed it, but I could not seem to find my way back to a comfortable and easy relation to games. Why? Well, because the games would not allow me to. Returning to video games involved an (re)encounter with sexist representations of women and a lack of playable female characters. I strongly felt that these games were not made for me. I felt like an awkward stranger and a visitor in a world that was made for men.

At some point, my unstructured thoughts on my own relation to gaming started to spill over into my academic studies. As a student of the Masters' program of *Gendering Practices*, I was introduced to a myriad of interesting theories that not only enabled me to make greater sense of my gaming background and complex feelings surrounding it, but also pushed me into asking new questions. It was a search for answers, and for other 'awkwards' like me. I did find others like me, in research on girls and games and in media covered stories of women speaking up about their experiences of game cultures. But I also found awkwardness that were different from me, and this was when I realized I had to ask new questions. My awkwardness in games was due to the masculine culture of gaming spaces, whereas I realized that being white and heterosexual in a gaming culture where norms of masculinities are interwoven with norms of whiteness and heteronormativity, enabled me to escape the awkwardness in some senses while others might not as easily do the same.

This background of my own complex embodied feelings surrounding my game experiences is what laid the ground for my fascination in games and gender as phenomenon. The hope of experiencing a gaming world where a diversity of bodies are allowed to find a sense of belonging, is what mobilizes my motivation for academic explorations of how whiteness, middle class, age and hetero-masculine normativity of gaming spaces affect and construct bodies in different ways.

1.2 Scientific Problem and Aim

Those who play video games today are a diverse group of people that span across all demographics. However, within modern discourses of gaming we can still see gamer identities being reproduced as white, heterosexual, middle class, young and male, which works to include a minority of bodies and exclude a majority of Other(ed) bodies from

gaming spaces. The so called *Gamergate*-controversy in 2014 might be one of the most evident cases where these dominant norms are visualized, as non-normative gamers, game journalists and game creators (mostly women) were subjected to massive online harassments involving threats of murder and rape, purely for their inhabitation of gaming spaces (Lees, 2016).

Gamergate was and still is (as the movement is still active) violent, dark and ugly, but it has also worked to mobilize a counter movement. It has worked as a mirror for the video game industry, and in that moment of reflection, the industry decided that it did not like what it saw. The industry was then faced with its (non-)diversity problems concerning the lack of – or stereotypical representations of – different groups in games, as well as its racist, misogynic and homophobic cultures within the industry (Edström, Mølster, & Nordicom 2014).

So ever since the movement of Gamergate took its form to carry out its continuous attacks on non-normative game makers and game journalists, the game industry has shown an emerging interest and ambition to change. It seems that the subject of diversity and equality has finally made it to the tables of discussion. As a feminist scholar and gamer, I embrace this development. However, I also believe that we cannot and should not stop here. Merely talking about change does not make change. It is essential that we have and keep having the dialogue about *how* we make change. As the effects of Gamergate proved, reflective practices are important for raising awareness on oppressive structures and mobilizing willingness to change these. However, a mere reflection on one's positionalities and privileges is never going to be enough to make actual change. It is a very important step, but it does not take us all the way.

While previous feminist game research problematizes the video game industry's reproduction of *same stories* targeted towards *same players* (the white, heterosexual, middle classed and relatively young male players), few studies engage in investigating and proposing directions for further steps in the industry's process of change. The aim for this thesis is therefore to add to this field by gaining knowledge about the current processes of change within an industry that has recently opened its eyes towards its inequality problems, and to do that by turning to people engaged in diversity issues with first-hand experience of game creation. Consequently, I am interested in game designers as performative agents and as potential agents of change. My hopes are that this will provide us with better ideas of the contemporary challenges that game designers' committed to diversity face in their work and what strategies they have in

order to deal with these challenges. With the base in this aim, the questions that my thesis seeks to explore are:

- *What challenges do game designers encounter in their commitments to diversity in games?*
- *What strategies do they have in order to tackle these challenges, and in what ways do these strategies interfere with dominant gendering practices within the Swedish video game industry?*

In my attempts to answer these questions, I do a diffractive analysis of eight game designers' narratives drawn from four in-depth interviews, two blog texts and one panel discussion. When engaging with the narratives, I draw from Judith Butler's theories on gender performativity, Karen Barad's agential realism along with Donna Haraway's and Barad's thoughts on diffraction, Sara Ahmed's figuration of the 'feminist killjoy' and Elizabeth Bernstein's theories on 'redemptive capitalism'.

As I embrace Donna Haraway's diffractive understanding of knowledge as a situated, the knowledge produced here depends on the 'optical instruments' used in this particular research setting (Haraway, 1992:295). Having game designers as part of this study's optical instruments, along with my own situatedness as a researcher, enables a production of knowledge situated in the performativities of these particular agents. However, I recognize that transformative practices that change games and gaming spaces into more inclusive spaces cannot solely be ascribed to these particular agents. Other agents, such as other professionals within the industry, players and the video games in themselves, play active parts as well. While acknowledging this, investigating the performativities of these other agents lies beyond the scope for this thesis.

1.3 Contribution to the Field of Gender Studies

As stated in the research questions, this study intends to critically analyze gendering practices in relation to game creation and the Swedish video game industry. This thesis is written within the field of *Gender Studies* in which gendering practices are core focuses for research. Since video games represent a major modern cultural phenomenon that also is entangled with relational systems of power and oppression based on social categorizations of gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, class and so on, studies that critically investigate gendering practices in relation to games and game creation become of great importance and relevance to the field

of gender studies. This study has a particular relevance since studies with primary focus on game creators (rather than focusing on the video games or the players) are few within this field.

2. Literature Review

This literature review includes two sections. In the first section, I give a short historical trajectory of how the gaming phenomenon can be understood in relation to discourses of gender equality from a Swedish context. This enables me to situate the gaming phenomenon as well as this thesis in a time and place. In section two, I present and discuss existing literature on game creation and diversity work within the video game industry. Since transdisciplinary studies on diversity and video games make for a rather small research field, I include research situated both inside and outside of the Swedish context. Most of the research found in this field was situated in European and North American contexts.

2.1 Gaming Bodies and Discourses on Gender Equality

When I look back on the passed twenty years since I first started playing video games, I am dazzled by how much that has changed in terms of the medium itself, the game industry and the discussions and meanings we make around games. Since the Swedish video game industry took its first steps in the early 1990's, it has grown into a thriving and lucrative business for game companies as well as for independent game developers. Today, the game industry represents a culturally important part of the IT-sector in Sweden (Sandqvist, 2012; Metsis & Kroon, 2016:4).

Video games are a natural part in most people's lives today, among children as well as adults. As a cultural phenomenon, video games have taken place in almost every home and school on TV's and computers, as well as in almost every pocket on mobile phones. Games are played in many different ways for many different purposes and are no longer reserved for a few (Sandqvist, 2013; Terlutter & Capella, 2013; Metsis & Kroon, 2016). Thus, whether you play games or not, I believe that all our lives are in different ways affected by the gaming phenomenon.

In the context of Sweden, we have had decades of lively political discussions surrounding gender equality issues. Feminist scholars have shown how notions of gender equality have become interwoven with notions of Swedishness and with the country's self-image (*see* De Los Reyes, 2000). However, it seems to me that when people started playing video games in Sweden, the gaming phenomenon and discourses of gender equality worked parallel to each other. As long as gaming was considered by the society as an activity for only a few nerdy

and asocial boys, then gender equality discourses did not intervene in the gaming phenomenon, and thus did not demand change.

Today, it seems like we are at a different situation where the gaming phenomenon and discourses of gender equality have engaged in a dialectic relationship. This could be due to the recent years of the video game industry receiving substantial criticism from different parts of the society such as academia, media, gamers and industry people. One part of this critique addresses the industry's male-domination (Styhre *et al.*, 2016; Sandqvist, 2013; Consalvo, 2008; Dunlop, 2007). Another part focuses on the industry's continuous reproduction of the white, middle class, young, heterosexual and male player as default gamer (Lazzaro, 2008; Kline *et al.*, 2003; Dymek, 2012; Kafai *et al.*, 2008; Caldwell, 2015; Anthropy, 2012). As I see it, we have now arrived at an asymmetric situation where diversity among players become more and more visible, while the industry itself, and the games that it produces, continues to walk along the same roads. I situate myself and this thesis as one of many voices that are now demanding more from the games and the cultures we love.

2.2 Diversity Through Reflective Practices... and Then What?

Previous research on gender and games shows that the video game industry has been and still is targeting the same demographical gamer base: white, heterosexual, middle classed and relatively young males (Lazzaro, 2008; Kline *et al.*, 2003; Dymek, 2012; Kafai *et al.*, 2008; Caldwell, 2015; Gray, 2014). These players are often called 'hardcore gamers' in academic contexts, by the industry, and as well, by themselves. Mikolaj Dymek (2012:38) argues, "the hardcore gamer remains the most proclaimed important target group for the global video game industry". Dymek further argues for these targeting practices as one reason for why women and other non-normative gamers are excluded from gaming spaces.

A pressing question posed by Nathan S. McLachlain, Shawna K. Kelly and J.D. John (2015:53) is: "Are contemporary producers concerned that the male audience will reject a powerful female hero unless some partnership is made with the player, or is the gaming culture ready to broaden the scope of inclusion by producing and encouraging games of participation and partnership with a larger audience?" Scholars investigating this question (*see* Kline *et al.* 2003; Shaw, 2009; Dymek, 2012) often come to the conclusion that the game industry's tendency to target the hardcore gamer base, by making the same kind of games, is due to underlying assumptions about the hardcore gamer being financially safe (and other gamers being financially risky).

Recent research also shows that the video game industry is starting to acknowledge its inequality problems and lack of diversity in games and is showing ambition to change. While many feminist game scholars welcome this, they also point out that the industry's current approach to diversity might actually reproduce the power dynamics that these efforts are meant to change. This research points at the industry's attempts to diversify its games as based on gendered stereotypes and essentialist assumptions about demographical groups' game preferences and game design skills (Shaw, 2011; Styhre *et. al.*, 2016; Harvey & Fisher, 2013). Adrienne Shaw (2011:29) argues for this as "an ideologically problematic way to approach issues of representation" because "Like any identity, being a gamer intersects with other identities and is experienced in relation to different social contexts".

Similar arguments on the problematic aspects of the video game industry's representational approach to diversity are found with Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher (2013). The authors problematize this approach for turning diversity work into a 'number game'. They argue, when diversity work is understood as a matter of 'adding women and stir', then change becomes a matter of tipping the scale with more numbers of non-normative bodies (Harvey & Fisher, 2013). In line with Harvey and Fisher, I believe that change happens all the time and not in a single tipping of a scale. This also means that talking about diversity only in terms of representation and numbers becomes an insufficient practice. Representation in games and in the game industry itself is of course still important issues to discuss. But as many feminist game scholars have pointed out, there lies a danger in treating the number issue as the golden ticket to solving structural equality problems within gaming spaces (Shaw, 2015).

Most studies on diversity in relation to the gaming phenomenon focuses on game contents (*see* Dill & Thill, 2007; Friman, 2015; Dunlop, 2007; Wennlund, 2014) and game play experiences (*see* Lauteria, 2012; Clark & Kopas, 2015; Gray, 2014; Jenson *et al.*, 2007; Jenson & Castell, 2011). Even though creators of games are agents that make part of game cultures and in forming and changing these cultures, few studies have investigated in issues of gender and diversity in relation to this profession. The majority of the already scarce research on game designers and gender equality is mostly situated in organizational studies and tend to focus on the male dominance of the industry and gendering practices among the industry professionals (*see* Styhre *et al.*, 2016; Kafai *et al.*, 2008; Dymek, 2012; Consalvo, 2008). The study by Alexander Styhre *et al.* (2016) explores how professional skills are gendered in the Swedish video game industry and finds it to be common to understand female game designers as required in order for the industry to target female gamers. The authors problematize this

view for being based on essentialist notions of what it means to be a female game designer and female gamer. They write “This argument, intended to justify the presence of females in the video game industry, does not liberate women from their extant social and economical roles but ties, yet again, female professional skills to a specific gendered domain of expertise” (Styhre *et al.*, 2016:13).

While keeping the hardcore gamer base as the default gamer, the industry was early to recognize that additional targeting of other groups outside of this base could create new financial possibilities. In the 1990’s, the industry first introduced the so-called ‘games for girls’ (also called ‘pink games’). These games focused on stereotypical ‘feminine’ interests and values, such as makeup, fashion and social relations, and were intended to attract female gamers (Lazzaro, 2008; Kafai *et al.*, 2008). However, most researchers agree on that ‘games for girls’ never reached any real financial success (*see* Lazzaro, 2008; Shaw 2009). Nicole Lazzaro (2008:208) argues that the failure of these gendered marketing efforts was due to the fact that games are not played “for their gender-typing alone”. Shaw (2009) and Lazzaro (2008) both argue, as game preferences spans across gender binaries, the industry’s binary gendered targeting was doomed to fail.

Even though research points at the failure of the game industry’s previous attempts of additional targeting of women as players, we see new attempts of this today. To the background of women in the ages of +35 being the fastest growing demographic group of gamers, game companies are now looking to recruit more female game designers as a financial strategy in order to reach these new emerging markets. But as Styhre *et al.* (2016) conclude, these market logics build upon the assumption that female game designers have a special ‘femaleness’ to their game design, which in turn is assumed to attract female players as buyers.

Shaw (2009; 2011) problematizes the video game industry’s representational targeting for being based on static and essentialist understanding of identities. Along with the critique of the industry’s targeting of female players, Shaw also problematizes the way in which the industry is targeting LGBTQ-players and players from racially marginalized groups. She points at how the current discussions within the industry to target minority and marginalized groups are based on similar essentialist assumptions of identities as the industry’s ideas behind ‘games for girls’. She further argues that the practice of marking these groups as

peripheral gaming markets could have the effect of further excluding them from gaming spaces.

Furthermore, research show that demographic data seldom is connected to play style and game preferences (Lazzaro, 2008). Some researchers argue that women and other non-normative groups have been playing all types of games all along. This despite of the fact the most games have not been targeted towards them (Taylor, 2008; Shaw, 2011). Nick Yee (2008:91) argues that there are more similarities than differences in game preferences between genders. This means, according to Yee, that market strategies meant to appeal to the ‘female brain’ might “be solving a problem that doesn’t actually exist”.

These critical voices on the video game industry’s gendered market logics correspond to Paulina De Los Reyes (2000) critique of an approach to diversity often found in Swedish companies and organizations. This approach, according to De Los Reyes, is about increasing the numbers of marginalized and previously excluded groups within the companies and organizations. However, De Los Reyes (2000), along with Styhre et al. (2016) and Shaw (2011), all argue that in order for gendered inequalities to change, the gendered cultures and practices of the organizations must be addressed too.

Another problematic side with a sole numerical approach to diversity, mentioned by Shaw (2009), is that it assumes that having more women and other minority groups will in itself lead to change. This in turn implies that these groups are essentially ‘different’. In line with Shaw, I strongly oppose this assumption since it is essentialist and leaves the responsibility and possibility of change with the non-normative gamers and game creators. It constructs the problem of non-equality as a women’s and minority issue.

To sum up this review, previous feminist game research shows that the video game industry’s approach to diversity often reproduces essentialist notions of gendered identities. It is built upon the idea that getting a higher number of non-normative game creators would in itself transform gaming spaces into being more inclusive. From this literature, it becomes evident that the industry’s approach to diversity is based in reflective assumptions on identities as game design is assumed to be a reflection of the identity of the game creators. These reflective assumptions therefore build upon ideas of sameness: women as same, and together as a group representing the Other, in a binary relation to men as same.

In this thesis, I build on this critical work done by previous feminist game researchers that points at the problematic effects the video game industry's numerical and reflective approach to diversity. But while these studies problematize this approach, few studies engage in investigating and proposing directions for taking further steps in the industry's process of change. Among the existing studies on diversity work in relation to game creators that have been presented here, most focus on the cultures that work to exclude women and other non-normative game creators and gamers from gaming spaces. While this research presents the unequal and discriminative reality of games and the game industry, it also seem to forget to visualize the transformative powers that are already existing in game creation spaces. This is where I situate my contribution.

3. Theoretical Approach

In my quest to investigate game designer's experiences related to commitments for diversity in games, I turn to feminist theories, situated in social constructivism and posthumanism, that acknowledge subjects as performative and as potential agents of change. I use the word "potential" as diversity engagements are not always transformative (Ahmed, 2007), which makes a strong argument for the continuous need for studies investigating *how* we do diversity and equality work. I use Judith Butler's poststructuralist theories on gender performativity that include a Foucauldian view on power and discursive change. I also engage in Karen Barad's and Donna Haraway's posthuman theories on the limiting/enabling effects that reflective and diffractive practices have for social change. Further, I include Sara Ahmed's figuration 'feminist killjoy' along with her thoughts on the political implications of feminist subjects. In this thesis, I also use Elizabeth Bernstein's theorizations of 'redemptive capitalism'.

3.1 Gender Performativity and Recognizable (Survivable) Subjects: Butler

According to Butler, our identities are being discursively and materially constructed within discourses through the power of language in a process of interpellation. It is thus by being addressed and called a name that one becomes recognized as a subject. This means that we "require language in order to be" (Butler, 1997:2). But in order to become recognized, and to be called a name in the first place, one also has to be 'recognizable'. This relates to what Butler describes as "the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects". Subjectification works through a process of social rituals that decide, through practices of linguistic inclusion and exclusion, the survivability of subjects. Only the subjects that comply with existing norms of dominant discourses are recognizable and therefore survivable (Butler, 1997:5-6).

According to Butler, gender is not an essence, but something we *do* and construct in the performative acts of language. When gender is treated as an essence, it is also treated as fixed, and thus, non-changeable. The implications for this are that the possibilities for change and subversion become non-existing. Instead, Butler's theorization on gender performativity means that the possibilities for change lies in the doings of gender.

Butler's understanding of subjectification as something we do, and not as something we are, also provides subjects with agency. From this theoretical standpoint, the subject is never solely a victim of subjectification without means to challenge hegemonic discursive powers,

but also an active agent in the process of becoming (Butler 1997:14). This is closely linked to the Foucauldian discursive view of power that emphasize on power as relational and constantly shifting through discursive processes characterized by conflicts and resistance. Power is thus not an external force that acts upon a subject, nor something one can own. Instead, power is limiting and enabling subjects at the same time (Foucault, 1998).

For this thesis, I see how Butler's theory of agency within the process of identity formation, in combination with Foucault's understanding of subjectification processes within hegemonic discourses, enables me to analyze how the game designers narratively negotiate and construct gendered bodies in gaming spaces. In the analysis of the narratives, I will also pay close attention to the processes of negotiation of recognizable and un-recognizable subjects, and on the limiting/enabling effects that these negotiations have for the survivability of subjects. These theories will also provide me with a flexible approach to subjectivities that I believe is vital in order to avoid essentialist and homogeneous constructions of the participating game designers' narratives (Cahill 2007; Lykke 2010).

3.2 Agential Realism and Diffraction/Reflection: Barad and Haraway

Butler's theories on gender performativity has been picked up and revised by Karen Barad. Barad agrees with the poststructuralist understanding of language and discourses as performative. However, she argues that they have been given too much power in the poststructuralist thought. Barad (1998:90-91) emphasizes that approaching subjectivities only through the performativity of discourses "fails to analyze how *matter* comes to matter". In *Meeting the Universe Half Way*, Barad (2007:151) further writes that "Butler's theory ultimately reinscribes matter as a passive product of discursive practices rather than as an active agent participating in the very process of materialization". Barad argues that the poststructuralist epistemology therefore reduces the body and other materialities to "a blank page for social inscriptions" (phrasing by Lykke 2010:108). Instead, Barad argues for an understanding of performativity that "allows matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming, in its ongoing 'intra-activity'" (Barad, 2003:803).

I believe that Barad's posthumanism offers something important to all of us who attempt to understand what it means to live in an increasingly technological world where video games make a big part. It reminds us that game technologies both shape and are shaped by the social world. To approach the gaming phenomena from a posthumanist perspective means to recognize that transformations of dominant social orders related to games involves both

discursive and material agents. Barad writes: “The changes that are enacted will depend on the specific nature of the agential intra-actions (not all possibilities are open at each momentum), which may include the distribution of agency over human, nonhuman, and cyborgian forms, or rather the iterative (re)constitution of humans and nonhumans through ongoing agential enactments” (Barad, 2007:218). According to Barad, change happens in the intra-actions, and all intra-actions carry possibilities of change and reworking of “what matters and what is excluded from mattering” (Barad, 2007:235). Similar to Butler and Foucault, Barad therefore rejects deterministic understanding of power and recognizes the possibilities for acts of subversion and resistance.

For this thesis, I also take up Haraway’s and Barad’s theorizations on the visual metaphor of *diffraction* as part of the study’s epistemological and analytical framework (using diffraction as analytical method is discussed in the chapter for methodology). Haraway (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000:103) explains that in physics, diffraction “involves the study of lenses, the study of the breaking up of rays of light”. By thinking of this as a metaphor for knowledge production, she challenges another commonly used optical metaphor for knowledge production: *reflection*. Haraway (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000:104) writes: “So I use it [the optical metaphor of diffraction] to talk about making a difference in the world as opposed to just being endlessly self-reflective”.

Barad has taken the metaphor of diffraction forward and regards it as a methodological approach that pays attention to the “relation of difference and how they matter” (Barad, 2007:71). In line with Haraway, Barad (2007:71) explains the metaphor of reflection as implying a mirroring of sameness, while “diffraction is marked by patterns of difference.” She writes: “In contrast to reflecting apparatuses, like mirrors, which produce images – more or less faithful – of objects placed at distance from the mirror, diffraction gratings are instruments that produce patterns that mark differences in the relative characters (i.e., amplitude and phase) of individual waves as they combine” (Barad, 2007:81).

Barad further explains reflexivity as commonly used in science as a metaphor for representation, either as representations of the natural (realism) or the cultural (social constructivism). She further emphasizes that “reflexivity takes for granted the idea that representations reflect (social or natural) reality” (Barad, 2007:87). The problem with reflexivity and its heavy reliance on representationalism is according to Barad that the practice of mirroring only reflects on sameness, which ignores the diversity of realities. She

argues that change happens in the diffractions from the same, in the *interferences with what matters*. As reflection ignores differences only to reflect on sameness, it becomes an insufficient practice for enacting social change.

From previous research presented in the chapter ‘Literature Review’, I learned that the video game industry currently seems to have a reflective approach to diversity based on gendered representation of sameness (*see* Shaw, 2011; Styhre *et. al.*, 2016; Harvey & Fisher, 2013). Engaging in the two metaphors of reflection and diffraction for knowledge production means, for this study, to investigate in the *effects* of the video game industry’s reflective gendered practices through analyzing the challenges and strategies for diversity work identified by the study’s participants. In my investigation of the game designer’s strategies for tackling the identified challenges, I will pay close attention to in what ways these strategies either enact the industry’s reflective approach to diversity or disrupt it by enactments of diffractive practices. This further connects to the second research question investigating strategies for interfering with dominant gendering practices within the industry. In line with Barad, I understand diffractive practices as interferences with dominant norms, or how Barad would phrase it, “reworkings” of “what matters and what is excluded from mattering” (Barad, 2007:235).

3.3 The Feminist Killjoy and Willful Politics: Ahmed

In Sara Ahmed’s (2010) *Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)*, she explains that being a feminist often means to be a killer of others joy. To further explain this, she introduces the metaphor of a table where the family gathers around. Around this table, only certain topics and words are allowed to be uttered. The dialogues are thus regulated by an ‘order of happiness’. The ones around the table might say something that upset or wound you. If you choose to speak up to address this wound, you will be viewed as the cause of the problem and a killer of the others’ happiness. Ahmed writes: “That you have described what was said by another as a problem means you have created a problem. You become the problem you create” (Ahmed, 2010:1).

Being a feminist killjoy therefore means to come up against norms, it means to be “unseated from the table of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010:2). Ahmed describes the practice of being unseated at the table as a political practice, which she calls ‘willful politics’. Being unseated not only affects the unseated, but also those still sitting around the table. This because, Ahmed explains, the act of not taking a seat threatens to kill the happiness for those still at the table.

As the oppressive order is normalized and constructed as an order of happiness, acknowledging oppression will turn you into something difficult, into a problem and a threat.

The ‘willful subject’ involves politically charged agency as it is about refusing, speaking up and going against social orders of oppressions. Ahmed emphasizes on that only recognizing the social order as oppressive does not make the willful subject, as it requires willingness to actively work against it. She writes: “When willfulness becomes a style of politics, it means not only being willing not to go with the flow, but also *being willing to cause its obstruction.*” (Ahmed, 2010:7).

To put the definition of willful politics in relation to diversity work highlights the issue of where the ‘saying’ that diversity is needed must be followed by a ‘doing’. And quite often, Ahmed argues, you find that the ‘saying’ can actually be part of upholding oppressive structures that it is said to work against, which turns the actual ‘doing’ into the killjoy of diversity work. Ahmed points at the problem with contemporary diversity discourses asking of certain bodies (often women and racially marginalized groups) to embody a commitment to diversity while they are not allowed to speak. She writes: “We are asked to smile in their brochures. The smile of diversity is a way of not allowing racism to surface; it is a form of political recession” (Ahmed, 2010:7).

Ahmed also emphasizes on willful politics as a *collective* political struggle. As people are being alienated from the table of happiness all the time, you can always find others that share experiences of alienation. According to Ahmed, when you are going against the flow, you are in need of the support from a collective. She writes: “It is crucial that we don’t assume that willfulness is simply about lonely individuals going against the tide of the social”. She further writes: “Willfulness is a collecting together, of those struggling for a different ground for existence.” (Ahmed, 2010:6).

Ahmed’s figuration of the feminist killjoy will allow me to approach the narratives of the game designers as potential willful subjects. It will also enable me to understand the video game industry as ‘a table’, and to approach this with critical questions of what makes for the order of happiness that governs the dialogue held there. It also enables me to investigate which bodies that are allowed to speak as well as the strategies for the willfully unseated.

3.4 Redemptive Capitalism: Bernstein

In Sweden today, it is common for corporations to include social values of gender equality and diversity as part of their marketing strategies. As the chapter 'Literature Review' showed, this could also be said to be the case for the Swedish video game industry as arguments for equality and diversity often centers on reaching 'new' untapped markets. I draw from Elisabeth Bernstein's theorization of redemptive capitalism to understand what limitations, and possibilities neoliberal motivations for equality and diversity makes for feminist engagements within the industry.

According to Bernstein's theory, capitalism is constantly adapting and rebranding itself after the current systems of normalized social values. With the strong gender equality and human rights discourse of today, capitalism has rebranded itself by incorporating these discourses into its corporate interests. Market driven forces have been rebranded as the solution to contemporary social inequalities. Therefore, corporations work actively to assure that "'social responsibility' and economic profitability coincide" (Bernstein, 2016:53). Bernstein also explains redemptive capitalism often involving 'gendered logics of investability' where minorities and marginalized groups are used as the face for new corporate branding strategies. She explains this as 'the girl effect', where "girls are figured as the optimal site for economic investment" (Bernstein, 2016:67).

Bernstein (2016:55) defines redemptive capitalism as "a capitalism that is understood by its proponents to be not only transforming of self but of world, and indeed, of markets themselves in a moment when 'the era of social entitlement is over'". While previous forms of capitalism presented itself as something separated from morality, it is today presenting itself as the mere site for the struggle for social justice. Consequently, morality is located "in both the consumptive and the productive moments of capitalist exchange" (Bernstein, 2016:54-55) This means that social justice fighters, that previously were the proponents of capitalism, are now invited to this new form of capitalism. This also means that social inequalities have become redemptive for all actors, from feminists to capitalist, as they are all constructed as being on 'the same side'.

Bernstein's theory aids me in my investigation of what challenges and strategies game designers experience within the context of the Swedish game industry. It enables me to understand the game industry as a site entangled with neoliberal interests for diversity and gender equality. Further, it enables me to investigate what limiting/enabling effects capitalist

redemptivness has for political subjects. However, while this theory provides a frame for understanding neoliberal motivation for diversity, it does not provide any theoretical means for subjects to change and challenge redemptive capitalism. Therefore, when investigating the question of possibilities for interferences with dominant gendering practices within the industry, I will rely on the other theories part of my theoretical framework that all reject deterministic understanding of power.

4. Methodology

4.1 Material and Selection

I gathered narratives from eight game designers on their experiences related to diversity and games. The material consists of in-depth interviews with four participants, two blog posts written by one participant and observations from a panel discussion involving three participants. As complementary material, I also include the participants' reflections that I received after their readings of a draft of the thesis.

In my search for participants, I kept Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's (2004:23) definition of the game designer in mind: "A game designer is a particular kind of designer, much like a graphic designer, industrial designer, or architect. A game designer is not necessarily a programmer, visual designer, or project manager, although sometimes he or she (my adding: and others) can also play these roles in the creation of a game. A game designer might work alone or as part of a larger team. A game designer might create card games, social games, video games, or any other kind of game. The focus of a game designer is designing game play, conceiving and designing rules and structures that result in an experience for players."

This quite open definition of a game designer enables me to include designers that work at game companies as well independently. Moreover, this open definition also includes other types of game design than only video game design. Since the cultural phenomenon of video games is what constitutes the study's focus, my initial idea was to limit the selection of participants to video game designers. However, from networking with various game designers in search for participants, I found that diversity initiatives for games often include actors involved in both digital and analogue games. For this reason, I chose not to limit my selection of participants to video game designers. In the end, this resulted in six video game designers and two Live Action Role Playing (LARP) game designers. LARP is an analogue game form where play is experienced live. Sverok defines LARP as "an improvised theatre play where there is no audience per se but everyone is a participant of the game. In a made-up reality, every player has a character to play and perform as believably as possible. Using characteristics, tools and costumes prepared before the event, an illusion of the made-up world as encompassing as can be is created together." (Sverok, 2017)

My selection criteria for participants were firstly, experience of game creation, and secondly, a commitment to diversity issues in games. I chose not to approach my participants

on the basis of gender, age, sexuality or any categorizations other than these two (the position as game designer and commitment to diversity issues). The reason for this was that I wanted to open up for a diverse group of participants with the diffractive purpose of making change by allowing for differences (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000). With this, I wanted to avoid approaching the participants on essentialist notions of a shared sameness in social categorizations as well as treating certain bodies and experiences as representative (or reflective) for diversity engagement. I also believe that an open approach to the participants enables for an interview situation where they are given the flexibility to identify and position themselves in relation to their own experiences.

Since the Swedish game industry is relatively small and network based (Styhre *et al.* 2016:7), snowballing have been used as the main technique for sampling. Without any experience of game design, and being an outsider of the game industry, my first step was to reach out to a Gothenburg-based researcher with several years of experience of studies on the Swedish video game industry. With her help, I got my first contacts with people involved in game creation who, in their turn, put me in touch with others. It was also by using snowballing as method that I first encountered the blog that is included to the study material, as many that I got in contact with recommended this. When deciding on what blog posts to include, I decided that they had to be written within the last two years as I wanted them to be somewhat up to date on diversity work within the game industry. I also decided that the blog posts had to be related to at least one of the research questions. This resulted in including two blog posts to the material for analysis.

Regarding the panel discussion also included as material in this study, I was informed of the event on the Facebook page of a game studio involved in feminist game design. The theme for the panel discussion was “Feminist strategies for game design”. As all three panelists met the selection criterions for participating in the study, and also because the discussions during the event was so closely related to the questions of interest for this study, I chose to include this as part of the empirical material.

One worry I had about the combination of snowballing as method and having a flexible and open approach to the participants was that I might actually risk ending up with a rather homogenous group of people (which would defeat the diffractive purpose of making difference by visualizing difference). This is a critique I believe one can have towards snowballing as method in general, as snowballing implicates the participants recommending

on others that *they* think is of attraction value for the study, which might not always correspond to the actual interest of the study (Thomsson, 2010:63-64). I noticed this happening in a few of the recommendations as several asked “so you are looking for women right?”. When these cases occurred, I explained that this study was interested in people of all genders, which then opened up for more diverse recommendations.

I also noticed that the recommendations often reflected on sameness in terms of whiteness. This pattern might have to do with racially marginalized groups being minorities in the Swedish video game industry (and while investigating the reasons for this are out of scope for this study, I believe this too has to do with practices of exclusion in a pursuit of a white sameness), which made it more likely for me to get in contact with people that are lacking experiences of racial discrimination when snowballing is used as method. In an attempt to break the chain of sameness, I chose to include other ways of finding participants as complementary to snowballing. So I ‘advertised’ for my study in various Facebook pages that all were related to game creation and diversity in games, which in the end had diversifying effects. Although, despite of this effort, the majority of the participants are privileged by whiteness (including the researcher). This limits the knowledge produced in this study to mostly non-marginalized experiences of racialization.

In my first encounter with the interview participants, I sent them an email where I presented the study and myself in short. I wrote the email in Swedish and in English in those cases when I did not know beforehand what language/s the participants had access to. I also explained from whom I had gotten their contact details. In this first email, I also informed them of the duration of the interview (around one hour), that the interview could be done either face-to-face, over the phone or on Skype, and that the interview would be recorded.

I gave all participants the opportunity to be anonymous, as the names of the participants, and the names of companies with which they work, were information not relevant to include. With the active and violent movement of Gamergate in mind, that target non-normative game creators for hate crimes, offering anonymity seemed even more important. However, in my email contact with the participants as well as during the actual interviews, I also wanted to make it clear that full anonymity could never be guaranteed. Some of the participants wanted to be anonymous and chose an alias instead, while others wanted me to use their actual names.

After receiving replies from people interested in participating, I answered with an email in

where I further addressed the ethical issue of obtaining informed consent by informing them that answering my questions was optional and that they did not have to do anything that they did not feel comfortable with. I also let them know that they should feel free to ask me questions anytime before, during and after the interview. Further, I purposed a timeframe for when the interview could take place: anytime before the end of March (this would leave me with sufficient amount of time to work with the material before the submission deadline). By leaving the participants with the flexibility to choose the date and time within this timeframe, my hopes were that this would make it easier for them to fit the interview into their lives. I also left them with the choice of having the interview in Swedish or in English.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, I also chose to offer to all the interviewees and observed participants the possibility to read and comment on a draft of the thesis before the submission deadline. However, only a few of the participants had the time to do this (which I understand as this had to be done within the limited time frame of only a few days). Therefore, I chose to treat these responses as complementary to the rest of the material. Opening up for responses was done partly to better ensure that I managed fairly well to anonymize those who wanted to be kept anonymous, and partly because I wanted to escape a ‘traditional’ way of doing science where the gathering and the analysis of the material are separated. In most studies where interviews are used as method, the analysis of the material is carried out with no further inputs from the interviewees. This means that the analysis is limited to the researcher’s interpretations from only one interactive situation. To open up for the participants to interpret my interpretations is, I believe, to open up for another level of interactivity in the knowledge production process. Since this method, of being open for the participants’ responses, allows for the unexpected, the alternative and the different, I consider this method a diffractive approach to knowledge production.

I also realize that promising the participants a greater level of influence involves the ethical issue of how to treat the potential responses. Monica Dalen (2015:22) highlights this issue in *Intervju som metod* (translation: *Interview as method*) as she explains that the researcher’s interpretations of the participants’ narratives might provoke the participants if they find them unrecognizable. If ‘conflicts’ similar to this would arise, I would meet their reactions with a respectful curiosity, and a willingness to listen. I would also inform them that inviting them to comment on the material would not give them *full* influence, as I, from my academic position, am responsible for producing knowledge independently of possible conflicts of interest between me and the informants of the study. However, these interest clashes never became an

issue since the responses I received all centered on recognition found in the narratives and the analyses of these.

4.2 Qualitative Methods for Gathering Data: Interviews, Panel Discussion and Blog

I used a mix of qualitative methods when gathering the material for the study: in-depth interviews, observations from a panel discussion and collecting blog texts. My initial idea was to only use interviews as method, however, as I stumbled across other forms of material that I found relevant for this study, I realized that having a mixed method would give me a richer material to work with. I also believe that mixed method for gathering data is a diffractive way of producing knowledge as the materials gathered have been produced under different conditions with varied influence from me as researcher. While the interviews were produced after a careful preparation from my part – by reading previous literature on the field and constructing themes and questions for the interview – producing knowledge through interviewing gave me as researcher a relatively high level of influence. The conditions for knowledge production differed from the panel discussion where I became a mere listener and observer with no influence over what was being said. Similar conditions hold for the blog, where the writer narrates on themes that matter to hir without having to adapt to subjects and themes purposed by a researcher. Although, I recognize the power and influence that is involved in the researcher's act of choosing what parts of the panel discussions and blog text to include for interpretation. Nevertheless, I see how the influence of the researcher varies across these different materials, which to a greater extent than only relying on one method allows for more differences and the unexpected.

Interviews and other qualitative methods are according to Peter Esaiasson et al. (2012) preferable when the researcher is entering an under-explored research field, which I deem is the case for this study. Further, Esaiasson et al. (2012) write that interviews can also prove suitable when the researcher seeks to develop theory in contrast to the alternatives of testing or applying theory. I place my study closest to developing a theory, although, I do not find a perfect fit for my way of relating to theory in any of these three alternatives. This, I believe, is due to the fact that they are based in a positivistic research tradition which often stands in epistemological clash with feminist poststructuralism and posthumanism that make part of the epistemological framing of this thesis. Feminist poststructuralism and posthumanism reject positivistic understanding of theory as an objective instrument that an assumed disconnected

researcher can use for testing or applying unto an ‘objective’ reality. Theory is instead recognized as involved in the practice of knowledge production, along with the situated researcher and the research object (Barad, 2007; Lykke, 2010). The implication for this is that theory is not a fixed entity but rather a movement, which means that theory always is under development and re/creation.

The in-depth interviews were done face to face, at a location mutually agreed on, or on Skype. The interviews were semi-structured, which means that I as researcher had a set of questions for all participants while keeping a flexible approach to the interview guide. This allowed me to adapt the order of the questions as well as to ask additional questions during the interviews. I also believe that semi-structured interviews works well with diffractive methodology as it allows for the participants, and me as researcher, to explore our differentiated realities without restricting this process to closed questions and answers. Further, completely structured interviews would not be preferable in this case as I want to be responsive to what the participants say and to be able to ‘go with the flow’ during the interview. But as I am interested in particular areas of the participants’ lives, I chose semi-structured interviews instead of un-structured interviews (Leavy & Hesse-Biber, 2006).

The interview questions were all related to their experiences of diversity issues in relation to game creation and the game industry. The following questions were treated as frames for all interviews, while they were approached, posed and followed up on differently depending in the interview situation.

- Is there something in your own gaming experiences that has contributed to your commitment to diversity in games? If yes, what?
- What challenges do you face in your commitment for diversity in games and gaming spaces?
- What do you believe constitute the biggest challenges for the game industry to work with diversity in games and in gaming spaces?
- How do you see that you, in your position as game creator, can create games that welcome and embrace a diversity of players?

Since I did not know beforehand what parts of the interviews that would be of interest for the analysis, I chose to transcript all parts of the dialogues. But for the panel discussions, I chose only to partially transcribe. This was due to my position as an observer, which implicated limited influence over the dialogues. Therefore, I only transcribed the parts that I felt had

relevance for the scope of this thesis.

4.3 Method For Analyzing Data: Diffractive Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry, based on diffractive epistemology, will be used as method for analyzing the material. Catherine Kohler Riessman (2011:310) describes narrative inquiry as a method focused on “particular cases and the various contexts of production of data”. This method was chosen partly because of its strong focus on knowledge as situated, and partly because it acknowledges the process of narration as influenced by all agents involved in the specific research context. I will use narrative inquiry as method for approaching the narratives as storytelling practices of different reality/ies. This method thus allows me to analyze how the participants of my study narrate and make meanings around their experiences. I am also interested in this particular method since it involves analysis on both individual and structural levels. This enables me to approach the narratives of the game designer’s individual experiences as processes of constructing meaning that are interconnected to historical, cultural and structural processes of meaning construction (Wertz, 2011).

An alternative method to narrative inquiry considered for this study was discourse analysis. I considered this partly because discourse analysis, much like the chosen method of narrative inquiry, is based in the same poststructuralist epistemological tradition that this thesis partly builds on (Lykke 2010:148). However, narrative inquiry was chosen as method as this study’s principal aim is to follow what is said on the topic of their actual experiences in order to investigate in processes of change, and not to follow how things are said in order to visualize a discourse. However, choosing narrative inquiry as method does not mean that discourses are irrelevant for this study since narratives are produced within the realms of discourses (Lykke, 2010:159-160). It is rather a question of which method that suits best for the aims of this study, and as explain, I judged narrative inquiry more suitable.

Narrative researchers can be said to differ in how they understand what Frederick J. Wertz (2011:225) phrases “the possibility of objectively conceived ‘reality’”. Basically, there are two different ways of understanding narrative and story telling practices and their relation to reality: either as passive or active. Ascribing narrative practices as passive in relation to realities means that the narratives are understood as mere reflections of realities. However, this “naïve empirist dream of representing ‘reality’ without distortion” (Gough, 1994:58) leaves no room for interferences, as reflection only reflects on sameness. Thus, the reality remains intact and non-changeable which contributes to further essentialization and

naturalization of social power structures that matter for our realities (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000; Barad, 2007).

On the other end, ascribing narratives as active in relation to realities means that the narratives are ascribed with performativity and as active in *constructing* realities. Replacing a reflective lens on narration with a diffractive lens is according to Vivienne Bozalek and Michalinos Zembylas (2017:111) “a strategy for making a difference in the world that breaks with self-reflection and its epistemological grounding” which allows distortions, breaks and alternative realities. This can further provide “potential discursive spaces within which new knowledge and understanding can be produced” (Gough, 1994:58-59). Therefore, I want to use narrative inquiry as a way of generating knowledge that move beyond being “endlessly self-reflective” towards “making a difference in the world” (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000:104).

So what does it practically mean to use narrative inquiry grounded in a diffractive epistemology on the particular materials for this study? To approach the narratives of the participants diffractively means to pay attention to diffractive patterns in the agential intra-actions between different types of matter and discourses (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). I understand the act of diffractive reading in line with Lenz Taguchi and Palmer (2013:676) as a “wave-like motion that takes into account that thinking, seeing and knowing are never done in isolation but are always affected by different forces coming together”. In contrast to critical reflection, where the researcher approaches data as a reflection of a more or less fixed reality, diffractive reading engage with data in ways that enacts ‘flows of differences’ and allows for an exploration of the differences that are being made in the situated encounter of reading the data (Lenz Taguchi & Palmer, 2013). Using narrative inquiry grounded in diffractive epistemology means to move beyond “the imperative to produce a coherent and familiar narrative” (Mazzei, 2014:742). It means that I will visualize the differences, and not “zero in on sameness” (Mazzei, 2014:743). It means that the participants’ narratives will be approached in a more open and fluent way, and as I will attempt to avoid forcing them into closed categorizations (something I further discussed under ‘Material and Selection’).

The choice of using a difference-attentive method like diffraction was however done with caution as many practices of talking about differences work to legitimize social alienation, exclusion, subordination and power differentials between genders, differently racialized groups, different classes, sexualities, ages, ethnicities, functionalities and so on. Harmful and violent practices of differentiation can for example be found in the reproduction of binary

understandings of women as different (other) from men and the social construction of these as opposites. Whilst these practices exclude all those subjects not belonging in either of these two categorizations, the practices of ascribing difference only to some bodies also reproduce some bodies as normative while othering those marked as different (Lykke, 2010:23, 34-37; Ahmed, 2010). However, in my encounter with Barad's understanding of diffraction, I find this methodology going beyond this. Barad's approach to differences is about visualizing differences in order to interfere with the re/production of sameness. To me, this is the complete opposite of binary, separational and essentialist approaches to differences as these are about constructing some bodies as different/other in order to preserve sameness. Therefore, I understand a diffractive approach to differences as not only going beyond binaries, essentialism and marking particular groups as different, but also as interfering with these very practices.

4.4 ... and Other Ethical Considerations

As an effect of feminist ambitions to flatten, or at least to visualize, the relationship between the researcher and the researched, feminist research practices must always acknowledge the power relationship between the researcher and the researched (Leavy & McHugh, 2014; Leavy & Hesse-Biber, 2006). My position as a researcher and the participants' positions as researched involve the politics of interpretation, which places us in a dynamical power relation where they have limited power in how I interpret their narratives (DeVault & Gross, 2012). This is one of the reasons for why I chose a diffractive method for analysis. Diffractive methodology acknowledges both the research subject and research object as "parts of the same world and reality and involved in continuous intra-actions with each other" (Lykke, 2010:151), which demands of the researcher to be transparent of where the boundaries between the research subject and research object are situated. Consequently, as researcher, it is my ethical responsibility to situate my embodied 'reality' from which I engage with other performative agents as a co-producer of knowledge (Lykke, 2010:159).

Another important ethical aspect concerns translation. As language is (co-)constitutive of our social realities, translation becomes a performative practice in itself. Because of the situatedness of meaning making through language, translation makes room for dislocation of meaning (Palmary, 2014; Fawcett *et al.*, 2010). This means that the practice of translation must be paid close attention to by the researcher. While the blog posts and the panel discussion were in all in English, all the interviews were held in Swedish and thus required

translation. The transcriptions were written in Swedish, and I only chose to translate the extractions that were included in the analysis. If all of the transcriptions would be translated into English, I believe the risk of losing the context of the words would be greater. In the cases when I interpret a dislocation of meaning happening in the act of translation, I address this by including my interpretation of disclosure by, for example, including and explaining the meaning of the Swedish word. Aiming for a high level of transparency in the interpretations I make, all the quotes in Swedish are included in the end of the page in footnotes.

5. Analysis

5.1 The Participants and the Context in Which Knowledge Was Produced

In order to frame the context of which the storytelling practices took place, I begin this chapter with presenting the situations in which the materials for the analysis were produced. As I embrace Haraway's (1988) understanding of knowledge as situated, acquiring transparency over the situatedness of the knowledge produced is part of making myself accountable as a knowledge producer. This might also be of particular importance in the case of my study where I am dealing with three different kinds of sources (interviews, panel discussion and blog), which all carry different frames and conditions for the knowledge produced.

5.1.1 Interview: Lois

Lois is a 28 year old video game designer from Gothenburg. We met at the city library in one of their group rooms. Since this was my first interview, I was quite nervous before our meeting and felt a bit worried about maybe having too few, or too many, themes prepared for the interview. But thankfully, Lois turned out to be very easy to talk to. Just like all the other participants, Lois was very generous in his sharing around his experiences. This settled my nervousness a little during the interview.

Lois described himself as an "unpaid indie-developer". For the last four to five years or so, Lois has been creating games on his free time on the side of a job not related to game design. He is also currently taking a university course in games and art. Lois has been engaged in equality and diversity issues in games and game cultures through various local non-profit initiatives and networks.

5.1.2 Interview: Idun

Idun is a 36 year old video game designer and creative director who is currently working in Stockholm with one of the larger game studios in Sweden. Idun has several years of experience of working in the game industry, both as employed and with its own game company. Idun has also driven its own game innovation lab, worked as guest lecturer at universities and as consultant at companies (not all related to games).

When we were discussing the date and time for the interview, Idun asked me if we could do the interview at a tattoo studio while Idun would get tattooed. I agreed to this as I, just like with all the other participants, was very grateful that Idun could find the time to participate at all. Doing the interview while Idun was tattooed had a relaxing effect on the interview situation (at least this was how I experienced it). We had to take short breaks between our conversations when Idun discussed with the tattoo artist about her ongoing work. Those breaks gave me more time to think about what had just been said and what my next question would be.

The encounter with Idun was also very interesting as Idun, quite early during the interview, made it clear that it does not identify as 'feminist'. This came up as I explained that the focus for this study was feminist engagements for diversity in games. But feminism to Idun was a categorical way of thinking, which Idun rejects. As I want to leave it up to the participants to label (or not label) their engagement for diversity, this did not create a problem. Besides, the selection criteria were to have experience of game creation and commitment to diversity in games, which Idun easily meets.

5.1.3 Interview: Cleo

Cleo is a 34 year old video game designer from Malmö and the interview with her was held over Skype. Cleo has experience of independent game design and work with various game studios. Currently she is working with project management, not related to game design, with a company in Malmö. Even though she is not currently working with game design, her many years of experience of working with games made her stories relevant for this study. What became obvious during the interview was also that, even though she is now outside of the industry, she is still very actively engaged in equality and diversity issues in games through various established networks. Cleo has been working with diversity issues in relation to games in various ways: within companies, that she either owned herself or worked with, and in various E-sport contexts.

5.1.4 Interview: Meimi

Meimi is a 32 year old Live Action Role Playing (LARP) game designer who has been engaged in several non-profit diversity initiatives for games. The interview with Meimi was held at her work place in Gothenburg. As a designer of analogue games, Meimi positioned herself as an 'outsider' to the digital game industry. I was first worried that this would make

her experiences out of scope for what this thesis intend to investigate, but I soon came to find her outsider position rather interesting. While I too position myself as an outsider in relation to the video game industry, Meimi's outsider position turned out to be quite different from mine. Her position as game designer involves a level of access to and influence over the game industry on the whole, where digital game cultures are included as well. During the interview, it became evident that representatives from both analogue and digital games usually are present at game related events, including diversity initiatives for games, which places Meimi in close relation to the game industry overall.

5.1.5 Panel Discussion: Mimi, Ann and Charlie

The panel discussion was about feminist strategies for game design and lasted for a little more than an hour. The invited panelists were Mimi, Ann and Charlie. It was a really interesting panel discussion as these three had rather different entrances into, and experiences of, game design and game cultures.

Mimi is an independent video game designer, 2D-animator and illustrator from Stockholm who most recently went into game design. Ann is a LARP game writer and designer from Copenhagen involved in Danish and Nordic LARP communities with several years of experience of game design. Charlie is a video game designer and co-founder as well as co-owner of her own game company located in Malmö. She is also a writer of fiction novels.

5.1.6 Blog: "Discordia"

Discordia (2017) is a blog about games written by video game designer Åsa Roos. Under the tab "Om Discordia" (translation: About Discordia) on the webpage, s/he writes that everything found on the blog is hir personal thoughts and should not be seen as representative for the company or the games that s/he is working with. In order to respect this, I will not write any names of companies or games that s/he refers to in hir blog. However, I will not anonymize hir name as this is stated in the blog publically and is published by the author himself.

Roos has more than 20 years of experience of game design and hir interest in feminist issues is visible throughout the whole blog. Stated in the blog, hir hopes are for the blog to be a useful resource for critical discussions on roleplaying, video games and game design. It thus seems like the author's hopes for the blog coincides with my purpose for including the blog in the material of this thesis.

5.2 Challenges: The Conditionality of ‘Openness’

Generations of feminists before me have fought for bringing the question of gender equality to the political tables of discussion. Thanks to their work, I have had the privilege to be born into a society where very few people say that they are against gender equality. During the interviews for this study, I often felt like the participants wanted to let me know, or remind me of, that we are now past ‘that’ struggle. So, if we are now at a place where we (as feminists) have won the struggle of putting gender equality and diversity at the political agendas, does this mean that all is well? The answer to this question is unfortunately (and not surprisingly) no. While the narratives give accounts for a game industry with a new ‘openness’ towards discussing diversity issues, they also show that this openness is conditioned. So we are still struggling, although in a different way than before. It seems like we are struggling with the conditionality of this new openness towards gender equality and diversity.

5.2.1 Introducing the New ‘Openness’ of the Swedish Video Game Industry

As previous research shows, the Swedish video game industry is now showing ambition to create more inclusive games and game cultures (Styhre *et. al.*, 2016). Most narratives of this study support this as they give accounts of an industry becoming more open towards, and more aware of, its inequality problems and diversity issues. In the interview with Cleo, she explains that the Swedish video game industry has changed a lot during the last few years. I then ask of her to further explain how the industry has changed. She says:

There is a completely different openness. After Gamergate, there is a greater awareness around that there are problems and it is easier to discuss problems, so it [Gamergate] has also actually helped in some ways, even though it also is horrible. ¹
– Cleo (2017, March 30). Interview.

The industry has today, according to Cleo, a ‘different openness’ towards discussing diversity issues. When I ask Lois if he had experienced any change in terms of diversity awareness within the industry during the years, he gives a similar account:

¹ “Det finns en helt annan öppenhet. Efter Gamergate också så finns det en mycket större medvetenhet om att det finns problem och det är lättare att diskutera problem, så det [Gamergate] har faktiskt hjälpt på vissa sätt även om det också är fruktansvärt.”

I would say that there is an increased awareness, so in some ways, Gamergate was good because it meant that people had to pick a side. I believe that many people realized they needed to do something about that problem.²

– Lois (2017, March 13). Interview.

These narratives suggest that the video game industry has transitioned, or is in transition, into openness. Both Cleo and Lois seem to understand Gamergate as some sort of catalyst for this transition. But what has it transitioned from and what does this openness really mean?

One thing that Cleo associates with the industry's current openness is, as the citation from her interview above shows, that it has become *easier* to talk about diversity issues. She compares this to before Gamergate when raising her voice to point at diversity problems were often met with people arguing: "We are dealing with games, and games are supposed to be fun. This is in fact entertainment. Do you really have to talk about such disturbing things?"³ From Ahmed's (2010) theorization of the feminist killjoy, what Cleo gives account for can be understood as a visualization of a particular 'order of happiness'. An order of happiness is according to Ahmed what governs what is allowed to be said. Cleo's statement indicates that within '*the particular order of happiness of the industry*' (before Gamergate), diversity work and video games were constructed as opposites. Talking about diversity was thus to kill the joy of the ones who 'only wanted to create games', meaning that the one speaking up about diversity issues were viewed as the one causing a problem – a problem understood as non-existing before the person chose to speak up.

Another difference between before and after the movement of Gamergate is according to Cleo that before, she had to be 'super professional' in all her conversation with men in the industry. Being gendered as a women, it was particularly important to keep a professional appearance during game developer conferences where she met with crowds of industry people, she explains. If she failed to keep the professional mask on, men would assume that she was there for other than professional reasons: "getting laid"⁴. This indicates that female designers that failed to appear professional were viewed as (hetero)sexually available for (hetero)men. She further explains that if she turned down men approaching her for sexual reasons, this would make them angry. Not keeping the professional mask would also result in people assuming

² "Jag skulle nog säga att det finns en ökad medvetenhet, så på sätt och vis så var det bra med Gamergate, för att det blev så att folk blev tvungna att välja sida. Jag tror att många insåg att de behövde göra någonting åt det problemet."

³ "Vi håller på med spel, och spel ska vara roligt. Detta är faktiskt underhållning, måste du prata om så jobbiga saker."

⁴ "få ligga"

that she was working with marketing or finance, and not with game development. But this however was before, she explains, as today's industry is "considerably more open"⁵.

So how is the industry different today? An example she gives of the openness of today is, once again, from experiences related to game conferences. Today, it is common to have female, male and non-binary bathrooms, she says. While the alternative of non-binary bathrooms was non-existing before, she explains that having this third alternative is today considered as self-evident within the industry. Another example she gives of today's openness is that there are more women in the industry now. She says that even though there is still a lack of knowledge about diversity issues within the industry, today's industry is open to learn and talk about diversity issues.

It [Diversity] is discussed openly; nobody needs to be that afraid about discussing these things. I experience that you don't get as judged. [...] There are still lots of resistance, but there is also a very active, well, if one wants to talk about these things, one definitely don't feel alone.⁶

– Cleo (2017, March 30). Interview.

In the interview with Idun, it too gives account of the contemporary video game industry as pushing for greater diversity, both in terms of game contents and in terms of the people creating them. When I ask Idun how its commitment to diversity work is encountered by others within the industry, Idun says that it encounters mostly positive attitudes. Idun further explains that most people in the industry seem to think that initiatives for working with diversity issues are something good.

What these narratives seem to say is that the Swedish video game industry has become more aware of its diversity and equality problems, and that it is showing a greater openness towards combatting these. This also seems to have made it easier to discuss equality and diversity issues. Let us make greater sense of what this might possibly mean for feminist and diversity engagements within the industry by returning to Ahmed's (2010) metaphor of 'the table' and 'the order of happiness'. Around this table, only certain topics and things can be said and is thus regulated by an order of happiness. The ones around the table might say something that

⁵ "betydligt öppnare"

⁶ "Det pratas om det (mitt tillägg: mångfald) öppen; det är ingen som behöver vara så jätterädd för att diskutera det. Man blir inte så dömd kan jag känna. [...] Det finns fortfarande massor motstånd, men det finns också en väldigt aktiv, alltså om man vill prata om de här sakerna så känner man sig definitivt inte ensam."

upset or wound you. If you choose to speak up, you will be viewed as the one causing of problem and killing the happiness, according to Ahmed. So in this case, ‘the table’ represents the Swedish video game industry and ‘the order of happiness’ is the discourse that governs the dialogue held at that table. As these narratives say, it has become easier to talk about equality and diversity issues, which indicates that the order of happiness has transitioned from excluding diversity from the conversations to including it.

This transition could also be understood in relation to Bernstein’s (2016) theory of ‘redemptive capitalism’. According to this theory, modern form of capitalism is when contemporary discourses of gender equality and human rights are included in corporate interests. Bernstein (2016:45) further argues that redemptive politics “have served to bind together unlikely sets of social actors”. In the way that the participants describe the industry’s transition from closeness to openness towards dealing with diversity issues, I believe we could understand the table of Swedish game industry as redemptive. ‘Everybody’ is now open for talking about equality and diversity. We have thus reached redemption, or as Bernstein describes: an era where “social entitlement is over”.

So as the industry has opened up for discussions on diversity, does this mean that being the one to point at diversity issues no longer makes one a killjoy? Does this mean that there is nothing left to kill, i.e. that we have reached the goal of gender equality? What happens when the video game industry has become redemptive and everyone is constructed as on ‘the same side’? What is the new order of happiness? In the following sections I investigate further in these questions. I will present the way in which these narratives tell stories of an openness that probably has given previously marginalized groups’ access to the table, but nevertheless comes with conditions.

5.2.2 ‘Openness’... on the Condition That Same Bodies Speak and Other Bodies Keep Silent

During the panel discussion on feminist game design, the moderator asks the panelist about their experience of being “quite unconventional game makers” in an industry dominated by men. Ann says that she experiences a greater awareness in the game industry, and that she does not have to defend her feminism. However, further in the discussions, she also explains that in order for female designers to be granted access to the conversations, they often have to prove that they are “real geeks”. She understands this as a gender based exclusion strategy, as it is a “bullshit test that only applies for women”. On this topic, Mimi shares her experience of

having several meetings with male game designers who open the meetings with the question “do you play video games?”.

My experiences in the game world and my network with female game designers are often very helpful, wanting to discuss things with me and bringing me into their community. While in my meetings with male game designers, a few of them open [the meeting] with the question “do you play games?”. It’s really not taking me seriously. And to open with it [this question] is kind of to let me know that they don’t take me seriously, I would say.

– *Mimi (2017, March 29). Panel discussion.*

Charlie explains that she has similar experiences to Ann and Mimi. She experiences two different ways of being encountered by other people in the industry: as an “exotic flavor” or by being totally ignored.

I don’t know how many meetings we’ve had when we’ve been met with the phrase “yes, it’s very unique, and different, but we don’t understand a thing”. And the other thing is to be ignored. Now I’m in the indie-game movement, and there are many men there. They tend to ask me very little questions about what I do, what games I’m working on, what problems I’m facing. I know that the guys are talking to each other about those things, but they are not talking to me. It’s very hard to grasp. You cannot really say “why aren’t you asking me questions? Ask me questions. I have something to say too”. You often have this kind of strange feeling of being a ‘strange bird’ that they either think is very exotic or that they completely ignore.

– *Charlie (2017, March 29). Panel discussion.*

Being included as ‘exotic’ can be interpreted in relation to what Ahmed explains as the issue where certain bodies are asked to embody diversity and difference on the condition that they do not speak. She writes that within discourses of diversity, women and other marginalized people are often asked to “smile in their brochures” while she argues that “the smile of diversity” is a way to suppress voices and stories about structural inequalities. It is thus “a form of political recession” (Ahmed, 2010:7).

I would also like to stop for a moment at what Charlie describes as an experience of being a strange bird that others within the industry do not understand. What does it mean for subjects to be ‘un-understandable’ within the industry’s new openness? In this story she tells, it seems like the industry’s openness towards including a diversity of bodies constructs some bodies as exotic, and thus as something good but at the same time as something impossible to understand. It means that she is welcomed to join and contribute to diversity with her

embodied difference as female game designer, while her ascribed embodied difference also constructs her as un-understandable which in turn excludes her from the conversations.

Idun shares Charlie's experience of being encountered in the industry as un-understandable. Idun believes that this is due to a common phenomenon of industry people tending to listen to someone that they do understand and not to Idun who they do not understand. Idun problematizes this and relates it to a dominant internal 'fan culture' connected to a gendered practice, found mostly at larger game companies. Idun says:

They listen to comments from those who have already done this 'traditional' thing. They rather listen to someone that they know has delivered something that they like then, for example, to listen to me as someone new or who has made games that they don't quite understand. This despite of the fact that I have a lot more education and experience about game culture in general, which is quite irritating really.⁷

– *Idun (2017, March 25). Interview.*

In the interview, Idun did not further explain on how it saw this as connected to a gendered practice (and I failed to follow up on this comment in the interview). But in the responses Idun gives after reading the draft of the thesis, Idun further explains the experience of not being understood as "being invisible when the big questions are discussed, and exotified or feminized when something of less importance, something administrative or 'people oriented' is on the table"⁸. In these responses, as well as throughout the interview, Idun seems to position itself as a being that by societal structures is constructed as female. This part of Idun's narrative thus tells a story of a being that, because of the way that it gets gendered as female, is not listened to and made into a non-understandable subject. Drawing from Butler's (1997:5-6) theorization on "the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects", being 'un-understandable' could be understood along the same lines as Butler's conceptualization of being 'un-recognizable'. According to Butler, only the subjects that comply with existing norms within the dominant discourse are recognizable, and only the recognizable subjects are survivable. In line with this theory, in order for 'Other' game designers to be granted a voice and to be listened to (survivable), they must first be made understandable/recognizable.

⁷ "De lyssnar liksom på kommentarer från de som redan har gjort det här 'traditionella'. De lyssnar hellre på någon som de vet har levererat det som de gillar, än till exempel mig som är ny eller som har gjort spel som de inte fattar riktigt. Detta trots att jag har mycket mer utbildning och erfarenhet om spelkultur generellt, vilket är ganska irriterande faktiskt."

⁸ Correspondence in English

I would also like to take a moment to consider the meaning of what Idun describes as the situation where game companies rather listen to someone who has delivered the “traditional thing”. In Idun’s responses on email, Idun further elucidates on this by explaining that they would rather listen to someone who has delivered something that they are *familiar* with. In line with Barad’s (2007) theorization on reflection and diffraction, game companies’ pursuit of the familiar can be understood as a reflective practice in that it ignores differences only to reflect on the familiar (sameness). In Idun’s case, the effects of being encountered as unfamiliar are exclusion and not being listened to.

Even though most of the participants describe the industry as more open to discussing diversity issues, several still experience that being engaged in diversity issues often gets negative consequences for the person engaged. In some of the narratives, it seems like the mere act of ‘sitting at the table’ and occupying that space, can have negative consequences for them, especially for women and other minority groups. Roos writes in his blog:

Being a woman who speaks about equality and diversity in a still very unequal and non-diverse space *will* have an impact on your professional life. [...] If you want to ensure a future within the games industry (at least in Sweden), keep your head down and your mouth shut.

– Roos (2016). Blog “Discordia”.

S/he continues to explain how women’s acts of speaking up will most likely make it harder for them to get a job, as this would give them the reputation for being ‘difficult’. In my interview with Lois, he too addresses this issue:

I have never been its [the Gamergate movement’s] direct target. I have often felt afraid of it, in the way that I might have chosen not to do some things out of true fear of becoming their target. But I also know that, being white and male [‘being male’ must here be understood as ‘being read as male’, as he identifies himself as non-binary], I get away with more things than a woman who says *anything at all* about games in public.⁹

– Lois (2017, March 13). Interview.

⁹ “Jag har inte fått [Gamergate-rörelsen]direkt riktat mot mig. Jag har ofta känt mig rädd för den, så att jag kanske har valt att inte göra saker av ren rädsla för att få dem på mig. Men jag vet också att jag i egenskap av kille och vit klarar mig mer än om en kvinna säger *vad som helst* om spel publikt.”

How can we understand this issue with women and other minority groups facing negative effects for speaking up in the video game industry? In order to bring clarity to this question, let me bring back Ahmed's metaphor of the table of happiness and the figuration of the feminist killjoy. As these narratives seem to tell me, the industry has now opened up for discussions on diversity to be held at the table. But at the same time, the narratives also tell me that women and other minority groups engaged in diversity issues are often encountered within the industry as killjoys. Ahmed's (2010) explains, "you have described what was said by another as a problem means you have created a problem. You become the problem you create" (Ahmed, 2010:1). Ahmed's figuration of the feminist killjoy explains that women speaking up about diversity issues are often encountered by their environment as 'negative' and 'difficult', which visualizes how the oppressive order is normalized and constructed as an order of happiness. Interesting and relevant material to include here is also the comments I got from a couple of the participants in their feedback of the draft I had sent them, in where they tell me that the figure of the feminist killjoy used in this thesis aptly describes their experiences from gaming spaces. Lois writes that he finds the description on being encountered as the problem when you point at the (actual) problem "so very applicable on game culture."¹⁰ Idun gives similar response as it explains that its encounter with the concept of feminist killjoy, through the reading of the draft, was "empowering as it puts words to a feeling"¹¹. Idun further explains on this:

When I read articles with stories that I recognize, or encounter concepts like killjoy, I realize that it's not me who has done something wrong but that the problem is in fact a deep-rooted behavior among people, even among people that are friendly. I knew that I, and many others, have become immune to many things when we've experienced special treatment, objectification, exotification etc. all our lives. And now, when more of these things are brought up to the surface, it gets quite overwhelming to realize how much crap one has actually dealt with, almost on auto-pilot, got up and just kept going over and over again.¹²
– Idun (2017, May 8). *Emailed response after reading a thesis draft.*

¹⁰ „...så himla applicerbart på spelkulturen.”

¹¹ „... det stärker när det finns ors att sätta på en känsla”

¹² “När det kommer artiklar med igenkänningsberättelser eller begrepp som killjoy inser jag att det inte är jag som gjort fel utan att det faktiskt är ett djupt ingrott beteende hos folk, även om det är vänligt inställda folk. Jag visste att jag och många andra blivit immuna mot mycket då vi upplevt särbehandling, objektifiering, exotifiering etc hela livet, nu när mer tas upp till ytan blir det ganska överväldigande att inse hur mycket skit en faktiskt hanterat, nästan på autopilot, rest sig upp och bara gått vidare efter grej efter grej efter grej.”

This is one of several cases where I felt my choice of inviting the participants to respond on an almost finished thesis, and the choice to also include these responses as complementary material for the analysis, gave so much extra value. This gave the participants a chance to react on the ways in which I had put the material in dialogue with theory, as well as for them to further engage in this dialogue. For me as researcher, allowing for the knowledge production process to be open-ended involved a thrilling mix of feelings of insecurity, curiosity and excitement, as it was to allow for alternatives and the unexpected. The reactions of these specific comments presented above also further supported the image of an industry that has invited diversity to the table while at the same time constructing those engaged in diversity issues as ‘difficult’. This further visualizes oppression as normalized in the construction of the order of happiness.

The normalization of oppressive structures can also be understood in relation to the video game industry’s transition, or adaptation, to modern redemptive capitalism. Bernstein (2016) explains how previous forms of capitalism has presented itself as something separated from social morality, while the contemporary form is presenting itself as the mere site for the struggle for social justice. As morality gets located “in both the consumptive and the productive moments of capitalist exchange” (Bernstein, 2016:54-55), social inequalities become redemptive for all actors as they, within this new form of capitalism, are all constructed as being on ‘the same side’. So in this sense, the normalization of oppressive structures is also a normalization of the pursuit of sameness.

While Bernstein does not further theorize on the potential effects for political subjects, Haraway (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000) and Barad (2007) both points at how the pursuit of sameness, and its ignorance of differences, is an insufficient practice for enacting social change. The pursuit of sameness also hides the fact that everyone seated around the table are situated differently in relation to social structures of privilege and oppression, which constructs issues of social inequalities as something non-conflicting. As these narratives give account for, when everyone is constructed as being on the same side, as wanting the same things and as being ‘the same’, then all those people that do not fit into ‘the same’ are excluded, made invisible and silenced.

5.2.3 ‘Openness’... on the Condition That the Same Stories Are Told

Several of the participants point at how the industry’s recent openness towards discussing diversity problems is seldom followed up by affirmative action. Idun says:

Everyone can make statements, but to actually put the time into following up – almost no one has got the time for it. So it's a matter of a lack of time, and not always a matter of unwillingness.¹³

– *Idun (2017, March 25). Interview.*

The word in this narrative that I would like to stop at for a moment is 'time'. Idun says that even though most game companies want to work with diversity issues, few feel like they have the time to actually do it. Idun understands this as a matter of prioritization as well as a matter of valuing different types of work differently. Idun says that engineering type of work, like programming, is often considered by many as 'real work' while so called 'creative' work (sometimes including diversity work) is considered as 'play'. Idun tells me that when it hosts activities like game jams or hackathons, as spaces for developers to work with innovation and diversity, many employees express a reluctance to join as many feel bad for 'playing' while others are 'working'. Idun therefore argues that one big challenge for having game companies engaging in diversity work is to change this play-work mentality so that diversity work gets understood as 'work' too and thus gets prioritized along other kinds of work.

Idun's narrative suggests that the openness of the industry is governed by a valuation system. But what is the determining factor for how different types of work are valued differently? Idun says that one reason for why diversity work and other creative types of work, get devalued and down-prioritized is that the industry wants all types of work to be measurable in tangible ways like money or code.

Many of these so called 'soft values', such as working with diversity or working with teams to ensure their workplace wellness, are not visible because you cannot show this in numbers [which Idun later in our email dialogues added to with: *at least not in short terms*¹⁴]. You cannot show this in code. [...] It's not measurable in the same way.¹⁵

– *Idun (2017, March 25). Interview.*

This narrative indicates that the industry's openness towards diversity engagements comes with the condition that the diversity work either has to come with a cheap price tag, or that it

¹³ "Alla kan ju göra statements, men sedan att lägga tiden på att faktiskt följa upp – det är nästan ingen som har den tiden. Så det är tidsbrist, inte alltid ovilja."

¹⁴ Correspondence in English

¹⁵ "Många av de här så kallade 'mjuka värdena', som att jobba med diversitet, eller att jobba med team och se till så att de mår bra på sin arbetsplats, det syns inte för du kan inte visa det i siffror. Du kan inte visa det i kod. [...] Det går inte att mäta på samma sätt."

provides them with profit. It also comes with the condition that diversity work takes no time from the ‘real work’. When I ask Idun if it believes that the industry is governed by a fear of exploring new ways of working and thinking, Idun answers that it is always understood as risky for the companies to try new ways as they are always governed by money.

They have to make money in order to make ends meet, in order to keep all their shareholders and all their employees happy. They have thousands of employees all over the whole world. When you are governed by money, you sell what has previously worked.¹⁶

– *Idun (2017, March 25). Interview.*

Cleo argues in similar ways as she says that game companies want to see what economical profits diversity work could yield. This points to profit as de/legitimizing factor for diversity work. But what are the implications when diversity work only can be legitimized if it can be proved to increase economical profits? In the interview with Lois, I ask him what he believes is the reason why most game studios fail in creating diverse game content despite of their often outspoken engagement in diversity issues. Similar to Idun and Cleo, Lois points at diverse game contents as something that is considered within the industry as financially risky. Lois experiences that in the cases when game studios do attempt to release games with more diverse game contents, the studios always seem surprised if these games lead to financial success and “of the fact that there are millions of people out there who want to play different games”¹⁷. This indicates that some players are constructed as ‘safe markets’ and others as ‘risky markets’. This also further supports previous research (*see Kline et al. 2003; Shaw, 2009*) that shows how gendered risk assessment practices of the game industry tend to result in game companies producing what is believed to work, thus continuing to target the white, heterosexual, middle class and male gamer base by making the same kind of games.

From several of the narratives, stories are also told of two opposing player camps where the industry seems to understand one of these camps as a safe market and the other as risky. In the blog by Roos (2017), s/he writes about “the old hat defenders of hardcore gaming”, which s/he describes as a group “who did not necessarily come first, but those who took the culture and shaped it to become a male exclusive domain”. The Other camp is the “camp representing the new players, the new paradigms, the efforts to open up the culture and industry to those of us who are not part of the hardcore, culture shaping clique”. Roos explains that the industry’s

¹⁶ ”De måste ju tjäna in för att allt ska gå runt, för att alla deras aktieägare och alla deras anställda ska vara glada. De har liksom tusentals anställda över hela världen. Det styrs av pengar liksom, då säljer du säkra kort.”

¹⁷ ”av det faktumet att det finns miljoner människor där ute som vill spela olika spel”

initiatives to open up for new ways of understanding games are understood by the ‘old hat camp’ as acts of ‘censoring’ the developers ‘creative freedom’.

We’re locked in a place by prejudice and by preconceptions of what a successful game has to be, and when games who don’t conform to those prejudices and preconceptions surpass expectations, we are surprised. As if there isn’t a whole world out there with varied tastes and experiences that would love to play that particular game.

– Roos (2017). Blog “Discordia”.

Similar to what Roos describes here, Cleo gives account for an ongoing struggle between some game communities and game designers where these communities are trying to blame the “political correct social justice warriors¹⁸” for killing the joy and the freedom of choice of the game designers. Similar to this, Lois describes the issue of a loud minority, consisting of mostly white and male players, rejecting all diversifying initiatives as a way to keep their privileged position within game cultures. In a Baradian sense, you could understand these as defenders of sameness.

You have these people that are a very very loud minority that needs their status quo, and that ‘everything have to be like it has always been. It should always be the same.’¹⁹

– Lois (2017, March 13). Interview

LARP designer Meimi too describes the presence of a loud minority in discussions around gender equality and game design. This group often uses the ‘weapon’ of ‘historical correctness’ against attempts to diversify games, she explains.

Today, when there are big discussions around gender equality, it is often in [game] worlds that in some ways are supposed to have some sort of historical correctness connection to them, which often is connected to fantasy. This is very odd because we can have orcs but we cannot have gender equality. That is very interesting. But as soon as the word ‘HC’, ‘historical correctness’, is mentioned, there are a lot more discussions in these groups about ‘women should not’, or ‘women did not’, or ‘it’s not supposed to look that way’.²⁰

¹⁸ Correspondence in English

¹⁹ “Så har vi de här människorna som är en väldigt väldigt högljudd minoritet som behöver sitt status que, att ‘alltid måste vara som det alltid har varit. Det ska alltid vara samma’.”

²⁰ ”Idag när det är stora diskussioner kring jämställdhet så är det oftare i [spel-]världar som på något sätt ska ha någon typ av historisk korrekthets-koppling vilket ofta kopplar till fantasy. Detta är väldigt konstigt eftersom vi har orcher men vi kan inte ha jämställdhet. Det är väldigt spännande. Men så fort ordet ’HK’, ’historisk korrekthet’, nämns, det är mycket mer diskussioner i de grupperna om att ’kvinnor ska inte’ eller ’kvinnor gjorde inte’ eller ’så ska det inte se ut’.”

– Meimi (2017, March 23). Interview

How does the industry relate to this loud group claiming and demanding sameness by silencing a diversity of voices? The narratives seem to suggest that the loud minority is the same white male group that most games traditionally have been and still is targeted towards, thus the group that is constructed as the industry's safe market. This depiction of two opposing camps also seems to support previous research done by Dymek who argues that "the hardcore gamer remains the most proclaimed important target group for the global video game industry" (Dymek, 2012:38).

Several of the participants direct the problem of non-diverse games to dominant genre traditions and limited understandings about what a game is and can be. Idun tells me that it often encounters resistance from other developers when Idun tries to introduce new things in game design. The first reaction to initiatives for diversifying games is always that it is not possible, Idun explains. Lois, who also points at the problem with dominant genre practices, seems to connect this to the risk assessment practices within the industry. Lois tells me that the industry is governed by who it believes will pay. The problem according to Lois is that the diverse silent majority is often made invisible as buyers of games. This points to the re/production of sameness as something that is considered economically safe, while production of what is different is considered risky. He says however, that he believes that this is slowly changing.

It feels like it [the video game industry] listens less and less on it [the loud minority]. It [the video game industry] is coming to realize that 'there are a lot more people than only these people who play our games', and they see the numbers and do these studies that show that there are more women than men that plays a certain types of games. They aren't visible and they are silent, but they are there and pay the money.²¹

– Lois (2017, March 13). Interview

Lois narrative suggests that the industry is in transition as groups that previously were considered as risky markets, such as women, are now starting to be understood as potentially safe markets. This can also be connected to what Bernstein explains makes for redemptive

²¹ "Det känns ju som att den [spelindustrin] mindre och mindre lyssnat på den. Den mer och mer inser att 'det är ju väldigt mycket mer människor än bara de här som spelar våra spel' och de ser siffrorna och kommer med sådana här undersökningar som visar att det är fler kvinnor än män som spelar en viss typ av spel. De syns inte och hörs inte, med de finns där och betalar pengarna."

capitalism in that it involves ‘gendered logics of investability’. Bernstein explains this as ‘the girl effect’, where “girls are figured as the optimal site for economic investment” (Bernstein, 2016:67).

In the interview with Idun, I ask Idun what it thinks of the industry’s current strategy of reaching ‘un-tapped and emerging markets’ such as female casual gamers by designing games that is believed to attract this particular demographical group. Idun explains that it is very critical to this strategy as Idun thinks of this gendered targeting as often being based on stereotypical and binary ideas about what men and women like in games.

I think it’s such a cliché to go with ‘all girls would like this’. [As a kid,] I thought it was more fun with car games or war games. I believe that these things are constructed. It’s a post-construction that it would be certain femaleness to some types of games. So in part, I have a problem with this categorization on the whole.²²

– Idun (2017, March 25). Interview.

As feminist game scholars (see Shaw, 2008; Styhre, *et al.*, 2016; Lazzaro, 2008; Kafai *et al.*, 2008; Yee, 2008) show, when the game industry is looking to include and target a diversity of players, this is usually done based on stereotypical and essentialist assumptions about demographical groups’ game preferences as well as game design skills. In Idun’s narrative above, Idun takes its own experiences as example to reveal how the way in which Idun and video games are gendered result in a conflicting asymmetry. In the draft responses over email, Idun further explains how “people are often surprised when I say what kind of games I make and play, because those are often dark and violent²³”. This further points to the industry’s demographical targeting as constructed around essentialist and binary ideas about gender and games, which naturalize some games as typically ‘female’ and others as typically ‘masculine’.

5.3 Strategies: Interferences With Sameness

The participants all had different ways and strategies of dealing with the game industry’s conditionality of openness. *Separatism* and finding support in Other alienated subjects is one strategy used by a few of them. *Negotiating profitability* as de/legitimizing factor for diversity work was another strategy. A third strategy was to engage in what I would like to call

²² ”Jag tycker ju bara det är en klyscha att köra på att ’alla tjejer skulle gilla sådant’. Jag tyckte [som barn att] det var roligare med bilspel eller krigspel. Jag tycker det är konstruerat. Det är en efterkonstruktion att det skulle vara kvinnligt att spela vissa typer av spel. Så dels har jag problem med den här kategoriseringen över huvud taget.”

²³ Correspondence in English

diffractive storytelling practices, involving the *doing of difference* by visualizing differences in the creation of stories for games. In this chapter, I also investigate in the possibilities and/or limitations that these particular strategies might mean for interferences with the conditionality of the Swedish video game industry's openness.

5.3.1 Separatism: Creating a Feminist Table to Make Difference

Building and engaging in separatist networks was one strategy used by a few of the participants. This was a strategy for dealing with practices that work to exclude and alienate non-normative game designers' from participating in the talk held at the industry table. During the panel discussion, Ann explains that she is engaged in building separatist networks for female LARP designers as female game designers often lack supportive networks and often gets rejected when they ask for help. This strategy was also used by Idun for game jams initiatives welcoming all who identifies as women. Idun says:

What we noticed was that it is very much a matter of confidence and having the *courage* to go on a game jam. So we had pre-workshops a few weeks before where we had some workshops including Unity or Twitch – different ways of creating games – so that they got to try it before the actual game jam. This meant that they got to get to know each other a little and were able to build teams, and to feel like coming to the game jam wouldn't be such a big step where there would be a mix of people.²⁴

– Idun (2017, March 25). Interview.

One of Meimi strategies for dealing with the loud minority issue is to engage in a LARP separatist Facebook group for people not identifying as cis-male. Meimi explains this group as enabling all those voices that are usually silenced by the loudness of the few to finally be heard. This group enabled the members to talk about the things that mattered to them without interferences from people who would shame and blame them for doing so. Meimi also tells me that in this group women also started to share their experiences of sexual harassment from their LARP experiences. I ask Meimi if she believes that the women subjected to sexual harassments would have shared their experiences if the forum had not been a separatist one. She answers:

²⁴ ”Det vi märkte var att det handlar mycket om självförtroende och att *våga* gå på ett game jam. Så vi hade för-workshops några veckor innan där vi hade lite workshops med olika Unity eller Twitch – olika sätt att skapa spel på – så att de fick testa det innan själva game jamet. Och då fick de lära känna varandra lite och kunde bygga team, och även inte känna att det var ett lika stort steg att komma på gamejamet sen där det var blandat med folk då.”

Never. It is also quite common that people go and ask a question in an open and public [non-separatist] group like us who LARP or so, and then pose the same question in [separatist] 'LARP Women Unite'; there is often a huge difference in how the answers are formulated and how the discussions goes and what people who answers. It's a completely different climate. So it is quite interesting to see that some people cannot even make their voice heard in ordinary cases, it's just not even worth writing in those groups.²⁵

– Meimi (2017, March 22). Interview

These separatist group seems to offer a collectivity where silenced voices can make their voices heard. In relation to Ahmed's theorization on willful politics, this can thus be understood as part of a collective political struggle where the ones alienated from the table of happiness can find others that share experiences of alienation. According to Ahmed, you need support from a collective when you are going against the flow. She writes that "It is crucial that we don't assume that willfulness is simply about lonely individuals going against the tide of the social". She further writes, "Willfulness is a collecting together, of those struggling for a different ground for existence." (Ahmed, 2010:6). So it seems like in these cases present in the narratives above, separatism as strategy offers a collective safe space where the silenced find a place to talk. But does this change anything in the bigger picture? Can there be interferences with the 'the industry table' if the 'feminist table' is separated from it?

I have these questions in mind when Meimi continues to explain how this safe space has had the effects of group members collectively mobilizing around certain issues and demanding change. As for the example with the conversations where female LARP players shared their experiences of sexual harassments, Meimi tells me that these narratives soon revealed a pattern in which some male LARP players could be identified as responsible for these acts. Some people in the group then addressed those individuals responsible for these criminal actions. Some were also reported to the police. In this sense, the separatist group had effects that reached outside of this group.

²⁵ "Aldrig. Det är ju också ganska vanligt att folk går in och ställer en fråga i en öppen allmän [icke-separatistisk] grupp som vi som lajvar eller så, och sen ställer samma fråga inne i [separatistiska] 'LARP Women Unite'; det är ofta en väldig skillnad i svaren ser ut och hur diskussionerna går och vilka som svarar. Det är ett helt annat klimat. Så det är ganska intressant att se att vissa inte ens kan göra sin röst hörd i vanliga fall, det är liksom inte värt att skriva i de grupperna."

You can see that people now know that we women talk to each other, and *that* has felt like, just that this is being done, it has had an effect in that we will not be silent, we will talk with each other, we will support each other.²⁶

– *Meimi (2017, March 22). Interview*

Within Ahmed's theorization on willful politics, this can also be understood as the political practice of being "unseated from the table of happiness" (Ahmed, 2010:2). As Ahmed explains, being unseated does not only affect the ones that are unseated but also those still sitting around the table as the unseated threatens to kill the happiness for those still at the table. In these cases of separatism that these narratives give accounts for, it seems like the collectivity and the movement of the group made these diverse voices visible, which also had interfering effects at 'the industry table'. This could also be interpreted as a strategy that works to make previously un-recognized/un-understandable subjects into recognizable/understandable, which in line with Butler's (1997) theory also make these subjects survivable. By creating a space where differences are allowed to surface, this could also be understood as a diffractive strategy. In a Baradian sense, the doing of differences creates interferences with and reworkings of what matters (Barad, 2007). This strategy's diffractiveness thus lies in how the doing and visualizing of differences interfere with practices that pursue sameness within game cultures and the game industry.

5.3.2 Negotiate Profitability of Diversity Work

As diversity work is considered a risky business and economical profit thus is treated as the de/legitimizing factor for diversity work, one strategy for one of the participants is to add social responsibility as a legitimizing factor for diversity work. Cleo says:

So you always have those people who are saying 'what do we economically profit from this? Why should we spend money on this?' Then it also becomes a question of knowledge, about getting people to understand why diversity is something that we all profit from, and that it also is a matter of taking social responsibility as an organization.²⁷

– *Cleo (2017, March 30). Interview.*

²⁶ "Det märks att folk vet nu att vi kvinnor pratar med varandra, och *det* har känts som att bara att det görs på något sätt har fått en effekt i att vi kommer inte vara tysta, vi kommer prata med varandra, vi kommer stötta varandra."

²⁷ "Så finns det alltid människor som sitter och säger "vad tjänar vi på det här ekonomiskt? Varför ska vi lägga pengar på det här?". Och då blir det också en kunskapsfråga där det handlar om att få människor att förstå varför mångfald är någonting som vi alla tjänar på, och det handlar också om ett socialt ansvarstagande som organisation."

In this quote, Cleo both points at the aspect of investability and the aspect of social responsibility of diversity work. As she continues on this subject, she argues that diversity work should be standard for all companies and organizations as part of their responsibility towards having socially sustainable practices. She thus negotiates the way in which equality and diversity work is de/legitimized from the sole condition of economical profits.

So I believe that it will become more acceptable to put time and resources to it [diversity work] as you understand the importance of also working with social sustainability in addition to environmental- and economical sustainability in a company, so that social responsibility becomes more a given thing, and the reasons for why you profit from it. Because it is also part of being able to produce a competitive product.²⁸

– Cleo (2017, March 30). Interview.

Cleo does not seem to reject economical profitability as legitimizing factor for diversity work. She rather explains social responsibility as an additional factor. This negotiation strategy disrupts the de/legitimatization system in which diversity work is only legitimized if it can be proved to be economically investable. However, it leaves profitability as legitimizing factor intact and unchallenged. This can be understood as characteristics of redemptive capitalism where “social responsibility and economic profitability coincide” (Bernstein, 2016:53).

Another strategy for avoiding the condition of profitability is to do diversity work in non-profit networks, which means that equality and diversity work is no longer de/legitimized on economical grounds, but rather on ideological grounds. Several of the participants have been, and still are, engaged in various game related non-profit diversity initiatives and networks. However, as diversity work becomes an unpaid labor, it also becomes dependent on people’s spare time. What also became evident from the narratives is that this type of immaterial diversity work becomes dependent on individual ‘driving spirits’ that have to carry a big load of responsibility for keeping the networks afloat.

Idun tells me that it was one of the driving forces for a few non-profit initiatives – activities that stopped as soon as Idun moved to another city. Idun says that it is quite common that if the driven people leave, then everything falls. And as the work was immaterial, there was no

²⁸ “Så jag tror att det blir mer acceptabelt att lägga tid och resurser på det, allt eftersom att man förstår vikten att också jobba med socialt hållbarhet utöver miljömässig- och ekonomisk hållbarhet i ett företag, så det sociala ansvaret blir än mer självklart, och varför man tjänar på det. Därför att det också är en del av att kunna leverera en produkt som är konkurrenskraftig.”

budget, which meant that all people involved went without any payments. As Idun explains it, the issue of time becomes a problem here too, as people needed to find time to work with diversity initiatives on the side of their paying jobs. According to Idun, even though many people expressed that diversity was an important issue to them, few actually prioritized it. Lois describes the same difficulties as he explains that many game designers seem interested in the issue of diversity and games, but few are interested in devoting their time for participating in diversity projects. One problem connected to this is that this kind of (unpaid) work demands of you that you can afford to donate both your time and money. Lois tells me that few were able to do that.

As several of the participants with experience of working with game companies tells me that equality and diversity initiatives at companies are only made understandable if they can be translated into money, it seems like game designers committed to diversity issues can either choose to convince their peers of the investability of diversity work or to escape this condition by working with diversity issues in non-profit and non-paying networks. The first strategy however does not challenge the redemptive corporate motivations for diversity but rather reinforce them as it accepts profitability as de/legitimizing factor for diversity work. And while the second strategy escapes the conditionality of profitability, as the work is immaterial, it reinforces sameness in what matters (and what does not matter) as diversity work becomes a work not worth being paid for doing and thus valued lower than other types of paying jobs.

5.3.3 Diffractive Storytelling Practices in Game Design

At the panel discussion, all the participants are asked by the moderator about their 'feminist strategy' when writing or designing for games. An interesting discussion follows where the three game designers all seem understand their feminist strategies for game design as a way of making a difference by visualizing differences in the stories they tell. In Baradian (Barad, 2007) terms, this could be understood as *interferences* with the game industry's reflective practices where different stories are forced into sameness. When Mimi describes her current game project, she explains that her strategy is to create different stories: stories about the people, places and bodies that make important part of her reality but that, for the most part, are not heard by the society. She further illustrates this strategy as she tells everyone in the room about the current game project she is working on. The location from where the story of the game unfolds is a Stockholm suburb where Mimi grew up. This place is normally narrated in the news and other media as violent and nothing else but violent, she explains. As this

continuous production of the same violent stories does not correspond to her own experiences and feelings related to this place, she wants to tell a different story of a treasures place full of different people and bodies.

Similar to Mimi, Ann’s strategy is to tell different stories of the ones that go unheard:

For me, a feminist strategy is about telling the untold stories, all the stories. And in this case [with this particular game she is currently working with] its female stories. But in other aspects of feminism it would be stories of trans people, gay people, people of color – all these marginalized stories that get bulldozed by our society. That’s why I’m so interested in the whole pulling up unknown parts of history.

– Ann (2017, March 29). *Panel discussion.*

In the way that Ann explains that some stories gets “bulldozed by our society”, I notice that she also points at the violence of creating same stories by forcing differences into sameness. Charlie then explains that she is often coming from a queer perspective in her storytelling practices. She further explains queer game design as “widening the perspectives of what stories that are told and who are represented”.

[Queer game design is done] not only by having more women in the game or more people of color in the game, but also about how the game was actually made. [...] Also about having many perspectives. That’s one of the queer mechanics, to not just having one characters’ perspective. Because that reminds the player that there are not only one way of doing things, there are many different ways.

– Charlie (2017, March 29). *Panel discussion.*

In this narrative, I see two interferences with the video game industry’s reflective approach to diversity. Firstly, by pointing at representation as one among *several* issues relevant for queer game design, she challenges the industry’s numerical approach to diversity where representation is treated as the only issue of relevance (*see* Harvey and Stephanie Fisher, 2013; Shaw, 2015). Secondly, by allowing for differences, alternatives and “having many perspectives”, this practice interferes with the industry’s reproduction of just one and the same story. The same could be said about the narratives from Mimi and Ann presented above. As these practices allows for distortions, breaks and alternative futures, I understand these as storytelling practices having a diffractive lens on narration instead of a reflective lens, aiming making “a difference in the world as opposed to just being endlessly self-reflective” (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000:104)

Diffraction or queer storytelling practices were also found among several of the other participants for the study. In the interview with Lois, he points at the importance of creating different and varied games too. He further argues for the creation of different and varied games as a strategy for the industry to deal with the problems of the ‘loud minority’ and the ‘silent majority’.

I believe that a quite easy way to solve the problem is by creating several different games. [...] I believe that many people want several different game experiences.²⁹
– Lois (2017, March 13). Interview

As the chapter about challenges showed, many of the participants identified rigid and ‘traditional’ ideas about what games are, connected to gendered risk assessments, as reasons for the industry’s resistance to creating new kind of games and game contents. A few of the participants were also critical to the gendered targeting and as they argue that this create essentialist ideas about femininity and masculinity. In the quote below, Roos offers a different strategy for equality and diversity work:

The trick here, I think, is to not let ourselves be locked in again. To not say “if we could only have so and so many women in games, all would be well”. To not say “If women were only represented better, all would be well”. I don’t think all will be automatically well just because we do these things. I think all will be well when we can determine that games have a wide variety of expression, a wide variety of representation, a wide variety of heroes that we in some sense all can identify with.
– Roos (2017). Blog “Discordia”.

The title for this blog post is “Locking ourselves in”, and points at the problem of only focusing on representation in terms of numbers as this reproduces essentialist ideas of womanhood and “create a utopia where women are adequately represented” (Roos, 2017). S/he argues that locking ourselves in, in rigid ideas about femaleness in games, ignores the fact that women “are not the only ones who are being treated as the ‘other’” (Roos, 2017). Instead of viewing ‘one utopian story’ about women as a success of diversity work, s/he propose a strategy for game creation that allows for a production of a wide variation of expression and representations. This too can be interpreted as a diffractive strategy as the strategy involves the visualization of differences and interference with sameness (women as

²⁹ “Jag tror att ett ganska lätt sätt att lösa problemet är att skapa flera olika spel. [...] Jag tror att många människor vill ha många olika varierande spelupplevelser.”

same) as a way “to make difference in the world” (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000:104). I also argue that this strategy opens up for intersectional understanding of identities in that it acknowledges that being a gamer is an identity that intersects with many other identities.

Similar to Roos, Idun criticize the industry’s stereotypical and essentialist gendered representations and argues for a *non-categorical strategy* for game creation. Idun says, “It would be nice if we just could skip all categorizations. That’s how I’ve tried to work³⁰”. Idun’s strategy for working with diversity in games is focused on ‘player and humancentric design’ but with a view wider than ‘human’ as we are moving towards times where cyborgs and robot/AI co-creators are more common, according to Idun. This is a strategy that is based on the idea of beings as different and thus aims at creating games for peoples’ differences, and not the other way around (games created on assumptions of people’s sameness). Idun argues that creating games on the basis on peoples’ sameness excludes the people that do not fit into what is considered as ‘same’. Idun takes an example about norms of functionality to explain how this exclusion on basis of sameness works:

One problem that I heard from a chair bound person, who has limited movability in his hands, was that the specially designed game controllers didn’t get updated when the game console did. So he had to buy a new one all the time, and because those are special designs, they are quite expensive. That’s such an easy thing you know. Why it doesn’t update along with the console?³¹

– Idun (2017, March 25). Interview.

In our email conversations after Idun’s reading of the thesis draft, Idun elucidates on the industry’s pursuit of sameness even further as it points to some face recognition software failing to read darker skin tones. Idun thus relates the game industry’s pursuit of sameness to structural norms of whiteness and points at the racist effects of this. Idun further argues that this should not even be an issue since as “there are many ways of how to interact with games and tech, and big companies should be responsible to provide a freedom of choice for everyone³²”.

³⁰ “Det hade varit skönt om vi bara kunde skippa alla kategorier. Så har jag försökt jobba.”

³¹ ”Ett problem som jag hörde ifrån en person som är rullstolsbunden och inte har så rörliga händer, var att när hans spelkonsol uppdaterades så uppdaterades inte hans specialinköpta handkontroll. Så då var han tvungen att köpa en ny hela tiden, men de är ju ganska dyra för att de är specialgjorda. Det är ju liksom en sådan enkel grej liksom. Varför uppdateras inte den i samma takt som konsolen?”

³² Correspondence in English

So these are strategies that reject ideas of identity based sameness. The rejection of diversity work based on ideas of sameness could consequently be understood as reworkings of “what matters and what is excluded from mattering” (Barad, 2007:235). I also argue that these strategies can be interpreted as practices of willful politics (Ahmed, 2010). In order for the willful subject to become political, Ahmed emphasizes, it requires a willingness to actively work against it, or “*being willing to cause its obstruction.*” (Ahmed, 2010:7). Willful politics and the political subject are thus made as these diffractive practices involve politically charged agency in the acts of refusing, speaking up and going against social orders of oppressions.

Creating different and untold stories could be understood as a strategy to make ‘Other’ stories recognizable. It could thus be recognized as a strategy that works to make previously unrecognized subjects recognizable (Butler, 1997:5-6).

We’re not interesting enough to tell stories about. We’re not good enough to be anything but plot points. We’re not human enough to be heroes. For every game that comes out that objectifies, uses stereotypes and tropes, this is what the devs [developers] are saying. It may sound dramatic, but isn’t that what it’s all about? Women, other marginalized groups. We’re not full human beings in the eyes of society, so we’re not worth the effort of representation, of depth, or narrative. This is what we’re fighting for. Not for some imagined slight to get attention. I’m fighting to be recognized as a human being in the games we play and the stories we tell.

– Roos (2016). Blog “*Discordia*”.

Not being recognized means to Roos not to be a “full human being” in the eyes of society. Once again, we see this narrative of un-recognizable and un-survivable subject striving for survival by gaining recognition. In this way, Roos is pinpointing on an issue I believe is core to Butler’s theorization of survivable subjects: the impossibility of surviving if one is not recognized as a full human being. Significant in this narrative is also the use of the category ‘human’. By fighting to become recognized as a human being, Roos escapes gender binaries and essentialist representations of gender. Roos (2017) further writes that the industry needs to move away from the idea that “if we could only have so and so many women in games, all would be well” and explains that the ‘trick’ is to create games with “a wide variety of expression”. Roos thus seems to suggest for the industry to go beyond the reflective approach of diversity and is thus calling for a new kind of ‘openness’. An openness that is aiming for

creating stories for different human beings, and not aiming for creating same stories for the binary constructed sameness of white, middle class and heterosexual women and men.

6. Conclusions and Further Remarks

As illustrated in previous research (*see* Lazzaro, 2008; Kline *et al.*, 2003; Dymek, 2012; Kafai *et al.*, 2008; Caldwell, 2015; Shaw, 2011), most games have been and are still reproducing the *same stories* targeted towards the *same players*: the white, heterosexual, middle classed and relatively young males. This is also something that the results of my study support. In line with several researchers (*see* Shaw, 2011; Styhre *et al.*, 2016; Harvey & Fisher, 2013), I further argued that the industry's current approach to diversity works to exclude a diversity of voices from the stories told in games.

While most studies on diversity and games are focused on game contents (*see* Dill & Thill, 2007; Friman, 2015; Dunlop, 2007; Wennlund, 2014) and game play experiences (*see* Lauteria, 2012; Clark & Kopas, 2015; Gray, 2014; Jenson *et al.*, 2007; Jenson & Castell, 2011), this study has further contributed to this field by approaching game creators as potential transformative agents of change. In my attempt to understand the current processes of change at work within an industry that has recently opened its eyes towards its inequalities problems, I turned to people engaged in diversity issues with first-hand experience of game creation. I also asked myself two questions. Firstly, I wanted to investigate what challenges game designers encounter in their commitment to diversity in games. Secondly, I wanted to investigate strategies for tackling these challenges, and in what ways these strategies interfere with dominant gendering practices within the Swedish video game industry.

When investigating the first research question, the analysis of the participant's narratives gave accounts of an industry with an increased 'openness' towards dealing with diversity issues. I also found that this openness comes with a set of conditions, conditions that I in line with Karen Barad (2007) understood as all related to *not interfering with the reproduction of sameness*. Introducing Sara Ahmed's (2010) conceptualizations of 'the family table' and 'the order of happiness' to these findings also enabled me to discuss this openness as the new order of happiness, where the industry has transitioned from excluding diversity from the dialogues held at the table to including it.

To further understand this transition, I took up Elizabeth Bernstein's (2016) theory of 'redemptive capitalism'. This enabled me to understand this transition as the industry's adaptation to modern forms of capitalism where contemporary discourses of gender equality have been included into corporate interests. By engaging in Barad's (2007) and Haraway's

(Haraway & Goodeve, 2000) discussions on reflective practices as a pursuit of sameness by hiding differences, I pointed at the problematic effects of the industry's redemptive transition. From the results of the study, I discussed the problematic effects of everybody being constructed as 'on the same side', wanting the same thing and being 'the same': everyone not constructed as the same are silenced, excluded and made invisible.

The effects of the pursuit of sameness was visible in the participants stories about non-normative game designers, such as women and other minorities, as these stories showed that while their bodies and voices were invited by the industry's new openness and often seen as something good (exotic), they were also encountered as difficult, strange and un-understandable. I discussed this phenomenon, of being defined as a problem, as the construction of the political position of the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2010) and the visualization of the normalization of oppressive structures. I further connected the phenomenon of being made into an un-understandable subject to Judith Butler's (1997) discussion on recognition as precondition for subjects' survivability: to be an un-understandable/un-recognizable subject is to be un-survivable. From these theoretical frames, I further argued that the game industry's new openness is conditioned to having the *same* bodies (the understandable and recognizable) speaking and to having *Other* bodies (the un-understandable and un-recognizable) kept in silence.

Another condition of the industry's new openness that I found was not to interfere with the continuous production of *same* games. I related this to a gendered risk assessment practice that constitutes some players as financially safe and others as financially risky. Openness on the condition of gendered sameness was revealed in several of the participants experiences of diversifying initiatives often said to be welcomed in the industry, but only if these initiatives avoid making the games 'too different'. This supported the presence of a belief within the industry that diverse game content would risk upsetting their main gamer base (the white, heterosexual, middle classed and young male) and eventually resulting in losing it as buyers.

When investigating the second research question, I found *separatism* and collective support in other silenced voices as a strategy used by a few of the participants. I further discussed these separatist practices as practices of what Ahmed (2010) calls 'willful politics'. Other strategies found were related to game creation and involved making games based on people's differences rather than based on peoples assumed sameness. By engaging in Barad's and Haraway's understanding of diffraction as a method for making difference by visualizing

difference, I discussed these various strategies as interferences with the video game industry's approach to diversity that involves the pursuit of sameness. As opposed to reflexive practices, that only reflect on and reproduce sameness, I thus argued for these practices as interferences with the reproduction of white, heterosexual, middle class and male sameness. I also discussed these diffractive practices as strategies for making the un-understandable/un-recognizable into understandable and recognizable, which according to Butler (1997) is a condition for subjects' survivability.

Other strategies I found involved negotiating profitability as de/legitimizing factor for diversity work. However, as these practices involved either adding another de/legitimizing factor (social responsibility) for diversity work or engaging in diversity immaterially, I argued that none of these strategies works to interfere with the condition of profitability. I further discussed the way in which these strategies are reproducing the neoliberal valuation system in which diversity work is valued lower than other types of work.

Standing on these results, I see the need for further research on how game creators deal with the conditionality of the industry's openness. I also see a particular need for further studies that give voice to silenced non-normative game makers. As the knowledge production of this study mainly was situated in non-marginalized experiences of racialization among the researcher and most of the researched (something I discuss in the chapter for methodology), I see a great need for further studies that focus on experiences of racial marginalization within an industry dominated by whiteness.

Even though this study is specifically focusing on the Swedish video game industry and experiences of game designers, I believe the knowledge produced here is relevant also outside of this context. As this study involves stories of practices that work to suppress and hide differences in order to preserve sameness, I believe it connects to a wider research area where gendering practices of inclusion and exclusion are its core focus. More research is needed on the implications neoliberal and patriarchal redemptiveness for political (willful) subjects. The results of this study also demonstrate the critical need for feminist research in investigating strategies and practices that work against these depoliticizing forces.

While previous feminist game research problematize the game industry's reflective approach to diversity, few studies investigate and propose directions for taking further steps in the industry's process of change. While this study problematizes the industry's current diversity approach, it also offers strategies to go beyond treating players and game creators as one and

the same. This is where I situate this study's greatest contribution to this field. The narratives of this study have celebrated differences and thus showed an alternative reality where differences are no longer killers of joy, but a necessity for everybody's survival. I sincerely hope that the video game industry will listen to all these knowledgeable and different people who make up important parts of the industry, people that are already changing things. I also hope the listening ears will open up for the world of players as it is in its complete form: diverse.

7. References

- Ahmed, S. (2007). "You end up doing the document rather than doing the doing': Diversity, race equality and the politics of documentation". *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(4).
- Ahmed, S. (2010). "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)". *The Scholar and Feminist Online, Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert*, Issue 8.3.
- Anthropy, A. (2012). *Rise of the videogame zinesters*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Barad, K. (1998). "Getting real: Technoscientific practices and the materialization of reality". *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 10(2), pp. 87-128.
- Barad, K. (2003). "Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter". *Signs*, 28(3), pp. 801-831.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press.
- Bernstein, E. (2016). "Redemptive capitalism and sexual investability". In Orloff, A., Ray, R., Savci, E., (Eds.) *Perverse Politics? Feminism, Anti-Imperialism, Multiplicity* (Political Power and Social Theory, Volume 30) Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2016, pp. 45 – 80.
- Bozalek, V. & Zembylas, M. (2017). "Diffraction or reflection? Sketching the contours of two methodologies in educational research". *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30(2), pp. 111-127.
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: a politics of the performative*. London: Routledge.
- Cahill, C. (2007). "The personal is political: Developing new subjectivities through participatory action research", *Gender, Place & Culture*, 14(3), pp. 267-292.
- Caldwell, K. E. (2015). "'This is my story': Representation and change in final fantasy X-2". *Well Played*, 4(3), pp. 56-68.
- Clark, N. & Kopas, M. (2015). "Queering human-game relations: Exploring queer mechanics & play". *First Person Scholar*, <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/queering-human-game-relations/>, Viewed 2017-02-18.

- Consalvo, M. (2008). "Crunched by passion: women game developers and workplace challenges" in Kafai, Y. (2008). *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New perspectives on girls and games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Dalen, M. (2015). *Intervju som metod* (2nd ed.). Malmö: Gleerups utbildning.
- Dill, K., & Thill, E. (2007). "Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions". *Sex Roles*, 57(11), pp. 851-864.
- De Los Reyes, P. (2000). "Diversity at work: Paradoxes, possibilities and problems in the Swedish discourse on diversity". *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 21(2), pp. 253-266.
- DeVault, M. & Gross, G (2012). "Feminist qualitative interviewing: Experience, talk and knowledge". In Hesse-Biber. (2012). *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*. Sage Publications.
- Discordia (2017). *Om Discordia*. http://discordia.se/?page_id=71, Viewed 2017-04-15.
- Dunlop, J. (2007). "The U.S. video game industry: Analyzing representation of gender and race". *International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction (IJTHI)*, 3(2), pp. 96-109.
- Dymek, M. (2012). "Video games: A subcultural industry". In Zackariasson, P., & Wilson, T. (2012). *The video game industry: Formation, present state, and future* (1st ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Edström, M., Mølster, R., & Nordicom. (2014). *Making change: Nordic examples of working towards gender equality in the media*. Göteborg: Nordicom, Litorapid Media.
- Esaiasson, P., Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H., & Wängnerud, L. (2012). *Metodpraktikan: Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad* (4th ed.). Stockholm: Norstedts juridik.
- Fawcett, A., Guadarrama, A., Parker, K., Guadarrama, Karla, & Parker, Rebecca Hyde. (2010). *Translation theory and practice in dialogue* (Continuum studies in translation). London: Continuum.
- Foucault, M. (1998) [1976]. *The will to knowledge: The history of sexuality volume one*. London: Penguin Books.

- Friman, U. (2015). "From pixel babes to active agents – how to fix the lack of diversity in female digital game characters". *Well Played*, 4(3), pp. 11-25.
- Gough, N. (1994). "Narration, reflection, diffraction: Aspects of fiction in educational inquiry". *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 21(3), pp. 47-76.
- Gray, K. (2014). *Race, gender, and deviance in Xbox live: Theoretical perspectives from the virtual margins*. Waltham, MA: Anderson Publishing.
- Haraway, D. (1988). "Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective". *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575-99.
- Haraway, D. (1992). "The promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others". In Grossberg, L., Nelson, C., Treichler, P., (1992) *Cultural studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, D., & Goodeve, T. (2000). *How like a leaf: An interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve*. New York; London: Routledge.
- Harvey, A., & Fisher, S. (2013). "Making a name in games". *Information, Communication & Society*, 16(3), pp. 362-380.
- Jackson, A., & Mazzei, L. (2012). "Thinking with theory in qualitative research viewing data across multiple perspectives". Abingdon: Routledge.
- Jenson, J., De Castell, S., & Fisher, S. (2007). "Girls playing games: Rethinking stereotypes". *Proceedings of the 2007 Conference on Future Play*, pp. 9-16.
- Jenson, J., & De Castell, S. (2011). "GIRLS@PLAY: An ethnographic study of gender and digital gameplay". *Feminist Media Studies*, 11(2), pp. 167-179.
- Kafai, Y. (2008). *Beyond barbie and mortal kombat: New perspectives on girls and games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Kline, S., Dyer-Witheyford, N., & Peuter, G. (2003). *Digital play: The interaction of technology, culture and marketing*. Montréal; London: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Lauteria, E. (2012). "Ga(y)mer theory: Queer modding as resistance." *Reconstruction*, 12(2).

Lazzaro, N. (2008) “Are boy games even necessary?”. In Kafai, Y. (2008). *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New perspectives on girls and games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Leavy, P., & Hesse-Biber, S. (2006). *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications (US). Ltd.

Leavy, P., & McHugh, M. (2014). “Feminist Qualitative Research”. In *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press.

Lees, M. (2016). *What Gamergate should have taught us about the ‘alt-right’*, The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/01/Gamergate-alt-right-hate-trump>. Viewed 2017-01-12.

Lenz Taguchi, H., & Palmer, A. (2013). “A more ‘livable’ school? A diffractive analysis of the performative enactments of girls' ill-/well-being with(in) school environments”. *Gender and Education*, 25(6), pp. 671-687.

Lykke, Nina (2010). *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*. New York: Routledge.

McLachlain, N. S., Kelly, K. K. & John, J. D. (2015). “Actions speak louder than hypersexualized pixels: A partnership with Lara Croft”, *Well Played*, 4(3), pp. 41-55.

Metsis, H. & Kroon, J. (2016). Swedish game developer index, *Swedish Games Industry*, Stockholm. http://www.dataspelsbranschen.se/media/154926/gamedeveloperindex_2016.pdf. Viewed 2017-02-18.

Palmary, I. (2014). “A politics of feminist translation: Using translation to understand gendered meaning-making in research”. *Signs*, 39(3), pp. 576-580.

Riessman, C. (2011). “What’s different about narrative inquiry? Cases, categories and contexts”. In Silverman, D. (2011). *Qualitative research : Issues of theory, method and practice* (3rd ed.). London: SAGE.

Roos, Å. (2016). *What it’s about*. Discordia (published 2016-10-24). <http://discordia.se/?p=8702>, Viewed 2017-04-19.

Roos, Å. (2017). *Locking ourselves in*. Discordia (published 2017-01-18). <http://discordia.se/?p=8819>, Viewed 2017-04-19.

- Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. Cambridge, Mass.: London: MIT.
- Sandqvist, U (2012) "The development of the Swedish game industry: A true success story?" In Zackariasson, P., & Wilson, T. (2012). *The video game industry: Formation, present state, and future* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sandqvist, U. (2013). "9 av 10 – om könssegregationen inom den digitala spelindustrin". *Umeå Papers in Economic History*. Nr. 42/2013.
- Shaw, A. (2009). "Putting the Gay in Games". *Games and Culture*, 4(3), pp. 228-253.
- Shaw, A. (2011). "Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity". *New Media & Society*, 14(1), pp. 28-44.
- Shaw, A. (2015). "Circles, Charmed and Magic: Queering Game Studies". *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 2(2), pp. 64-97.
- Styhre, A., Remneland Wikhamn, B., Szczepanska, A. & Ljungberg, J. (2016). "Masculine domination and gender subtexts: The role of female professionals in the renewal of the Swedish video game industry". *Culture and Organization*, pp. 1-18.
- Sverok (2017). "Live Action RolePlaying (LARP)". <http://www.sverok.se/english/larp/>, Viewed 2017-04-15.
- Taylor, T. L. (2008). "Becoming a player: Networks Structure, and imagined futures". In Kafai, Y. (2008). *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New perspectives on girls and games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Terlutter, R., & Capella, M. (2013). "The gamification of advertising: Analysis and research directions of in-game advertising, advergaming, and advertising in social network games". *Journal of Advertising*, 42(2-3), pp. 95-112.
- Thomsson, H. (2010). *Reflexiva intervjuer* (2d ed.). Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Wennlund, M. (2014). "... jag finns inte i spel". *RFSL Ungdom och Sverok – Spelhobbyförbundet*. <http://www.sverok.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/jag-finns-inte-i-spel--En-rapport-om-unga-hbtq-personers-syn-pa-dator-och-tv-spelskulturen.pdf>, Viewed 2017-02-20.

Wertz, F. J. (2011). *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis: phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research, and intuitive inquiry*. New York: Guilford Press.

Yee, N. (2008). "Maps of digital desires: exploring the topography of gender and play in online games". In Kafai, Y. (2008). *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New perspectives on girls and games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.