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PINK AND BLUE WORLD Gender Stereotypes and Their Consequences
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Toys or Tools?
A Note on Technologies

Ringling of telephones, beeping of text messages, surfing on the internet, cryptic talks about MP3s and other gadgets – sometimes we wish we could all this set aside, turn off all machines and live in the world before information technologies. Some of us are successful in doing so, but to most it is apparent that in this information overloaded world it is necessary to find suitable instruments for the right orientation in it - instruments that grow out of the same foundations as this world. Nowadays, it is not only reading, writing and arithmetic, but also skill and abilities related to efficient information processing that belong to our basic repertoire of knowledge. Nowadays, computer skills, email and mobile phone communication, using of various electronic cards and formats, work with the internet are part of so called second, civilization literacy (Velšic 2002).

We don't have to be techno-optimists or techno-freaks to acknowledge the usefulness of these devices – they have become our common communication means, something like extensions of our own bodies. Besides their apparent practical advantages (swift contact with the family, workplace, authorities), their mastering is a prerequisite for getting a good job or for efficient management of one's company. Since nowadays computers and computer networks play such important role in the economy and society it is time to map also the gender characteristics of the computer culture.

The Cyberspace

Our life, our bodies, our acts are gaining a new dimension – through technologies they are entering the cyberspace and are, in fact, creating it through their activities. But what does this seemingly esoteric word mean? The term was first introduced sometime around 1984 by the cyberpunk writer William Gibson as a “*consensual hallucination... A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system.*” (Gibson 1992: 46-47). Although in his novel *Neuromancer* he set this term into the gruesome dystopic fantasy of a crumbling world ruled by corporations and decaying urban civilization, the term cyberspace has gained a broader meaning of a digital, electronically created and transmitted “reality”. This way, the term cyberspace concerns not only the future described in cyberpunk novels, but also the work of our present days. We can enter it through computer interfaces (the computer monitor, keyboard, mouse) but we cannot say it would really physically exist somewhere. Therefore, the general term cyberspace denotes virtually existing spaces, mostly electronic (information and telecommunication) networks, such as the internet also known as the World Wide Web – the network of hypertext documents presentable through internet browsers (Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator, Opera).

We can examine the gendered nature of the cyberspace and computer culture from various aspects: websites, software, we can look at their users and creators and examine how gender stereotypes are either reinforced or subverted.

Virtual Possibility of Change

At first glance it may seem that in the internet era the cyberspace is an open medium with room for changing usual habits also in how girls and women are presented– that it is an almost ideal space for bringing to life some ideas about social justice. However, the openness and non hierarchical nature of the cyberspace and its permanent resistance to unequivocal institutionalization does not mean an automatic subversion of negative gender stereotypes. After all, it is still people who sit in front of monitor screens – women and men, girls and boys, heterosexuals or gays and lesbians. Each of them brings in the cyberspace habits of their everyday “real” lives. The relative anonymity of internet users can reinforce these habits and so we often come across the view that in the cyberspace the male dominance is even worse. Sexual harassment happens in various settings – through emails with sexually insulting content, in CU_SeeMee applications¹ asking women to show themselves naked in various discussion groups or bigger or smaller chat rooms regardless of the topic discussed. It suffices to log in under a female nickname and the discussion about some everyday topic changes into impertinent “flirtation” in the form of private messages (so called flame wars) the outcome of which is at best disgust of the recipient or her leaving the chat room completely (Fulk 2000, Jedličková 1998). Therefore, it cannot be said that the internet would be an unquestionably safe environment for girls and women.

The Rise of the Digital Gender Divide

The study of the information society and technologies in Slovakia in 2000 carried out by the Research Institute of Communications in Banská Bystrica showed that with the exception of utilization of the VCR and satellite TV receiver all studied differences between men and women were statistically significant – namely it was utilization of the teletext, computer, internet, CD-ROMs and mobile telephones (Plintovičová 2001). The typology of internet users set by the survey about Slovak internet users SUIIS 2000 did not even take into account women at all dividing the mythical mass of computer geeks into managing directors, responsible breadwinners, internet practitioners, career managers, thrill-seeking nerds, college students and teenagers (*Základné výsledky prieskumu SIUS 2000*, 2000). The survey by the Institute of Public Affairs of March 2000 noticed significant differences between men and women in the level of computer literacy, but these have not been taken into account in the summary of key factors and their interpretation (Velšic 2002). What do these data mean from the educational perspective?

With increasing penetration of information and communication technologies, a different level of computer literacy will represent a new factor of socio-economic inequality, in which women are already at the lower end. The digital divide will grow wider and one of its important aspects will be gender. Recently, sociological studies identified the gender digital divide, which laid grounds for new educational programs for girls and women. The objective of these programs is to raise confidence of women and girls in utilization of information technologies.

Learning by (Computer) Play?

It may seem paradoxical how computer technologies bring to life the Comenius’ slogan of “learning by play”. From hours spent by playing PC games participants gain not only high scores but also higher confidence in using the PC. And even a cursory glance tells us that it is

boys who score higher here. While fighting in narrow alleys or driving in the F1 cockpit, they cease to perceive the PC as an add-on and it literally becomes the technological extension of their own bodies. The blurred boundary between them and the machine builds their self-confidence also in using other applications that may not be related only to winning computer games but they also gain skills necessary for achieving financial or career success. (Brzowsky 1998, DeBare 1996). Hence, on the one hand there are concerns –perhaps warranted – about the influence of PC games on increased aggression, but on the other hand it is not appropriate to prevent girls from playing these games or praise them for not joining these contests and “shallow” entertainment.

Would something like a special “girls’ software” dressed in nice pastel colors be the solution? It would seem so – especially after the success of the CD-ROM *Barbie Fashion Designer* in 1996 when girls sent a clear signal of preference to both parents and manufacturers. However, in the cyberspace Barbie’s characteristics and size have not changed (which her creators actually never promised), thus all creative designing of Barbie’s wardrobe did not break through the limits of gender stereotypes. Does it mean that girls should rather not be allowed to enter the cyberspace?

According to many experts it is necessary that we change and broaden our thinking about computer games and playing. It is not only computer games intended for entertainment that can be utilized for playing but as such can be also used other applications representing standard software equipment of each computer – such as text editors, website editors and the like, ordinarily not used for playing. It is not always possible to strictly differentiate between the PC as a tool and a toy – after all this should not be the most important. As a play children and youth perceive also writing, designing, creation of presentations, when they do not rely on manuals but discover their own ways of utilization of various editors and applications. This is more often a “girls’ matter”, but the assertion that girls use technology exclusively as a tool and not as a toy is at best oversimplified. To work with computer applications is not just about mastering a few basic and necessary elements. Ironically, this may be true about the game *Ready for Romance* when through “true-false” question girls get to the result of whether they are ready for a heterosexual romance.

Hence, software needs not to be necessarily divided into “girls” and “boys” or tools and toys. Although there are gender non-stereotypical games for girls (taking into account their interest in well-elaborated characters and social complexity and authenticity), it is possible to build confidence in working with PC also through regular PC applications. Writing, text editing, working with tables and pictures are not only about mechanical elaboration of assignments or fulfilling of tasks, but their elaboration in, for instance, a visually appealing form carries a lot of creative potential (Vered 2000).

Alternative Internet Spaces

The internet is becoming a place of on-line shopping and a space of a great marketing and advertising potential. Besides the most frequently visited portals relying on safe operation of gender stereotypes there are also alternative spaces for various minority and interest groups. Girls and women, boys and men can visit not only exclusive interactive magazines about fashion and life-style, but also pages for “disobedient” girls. This way they disturb the idea of the internet as the “male territory”. This idea is related to the academic-military origin of electronic networks and is perpetuated by a lower visibility of girls and women in on-line spaces (related e.g. to their different styles of verbal expression) and by gender ideology inherent in the “machine” – i.e. in software design. As they say, it is not the user who

configures the computer but the computer configures the user. On-line freedom of construction of one's own identity is limited, but it also supports the emergence of new sites located "on the edge".

Girls and women want to make themselves visible and point out what they lack in the cyberspace. River Gingchild built a network of personal websites of people of the African origin *Digital Sojourn* (named after Sojourner Truth – an abolitionist and women's rights activist) since to her the internet was "white and male". Some sites are devoted to building of female "virtual sisterhood" through networks of websites of women's organizations and activities, various discussion forums and webzines.

Rather diverse is the movement of young women who label themselves not as ordinary *girls*, but call themselves *gURLs*, *girrls*, *geek-girls*, *cybergirls*, *nerds* or *chicks*. They adopted these initially derogatory words, and under stereotypical names they disturb gender stereotypes, and, more importantly, they very effectively utilize internet search engines (AltaVista, Google). If we type in the regular term *girl*, the search engine will inundate us with porn sites. In contrast, it is enough to have the terms *grrrl*, *geek* or *nerd* in the title of a website and they will not appear among the offer of *girls* who half naked "wait" on pornography servers. This way, new ideas about girls and women have been created – they do not identify with the idealistic idea of the second wave feminists about the global, world-wide sisterhood where the unifying platform is the simple fact that one is a woman (Wakeford 2001). These women are self-confident "naturals" with their own responsibility, savoring their femininity and responding to insults with derisive ASCII II code signs such as (.)(.), which can be a good answer to the appeal: "show me your tits."

Cyberfeminism

1. *cyberfeminism is not a fragrance*
 6. *cyberfeminism is not boring*
 19. *cyberfeminism is not anti-male*
 23. *cyberfeminism nije poslusan*
 48. *cyberfeminism is not exclusive*
 79. *cyberfeminism is not science fiction*
 85. *cyberfeminism is not a one-way street*
 100. *cyberfeminism has not only one language*
- (Old Boys Network 1999)

Some cybergirrls, artists using new technologies and programmers, label themselves as cyberfeminists. Cyberfeminism is not a unified movement; it rather appreciates disagreement and openness. The cyberfeminist group the Old Boys Network for instance formulated a hundred anti-theses on what cyberfeminism is not. Their starting point is the notion of a human being as a cyborg – as it was formulated by the primatologist and philosopher Donna Haraway. The Cyborg is a being on the edge of the "natural" (biological, physical) body of an individual and its social surroundings; it is an organism connected with technologies, a hybrid of an organism and a machine. It is a creature of lived social reality, but, at the same time, it also is a creature of fiction and fantasy, and these dimensions cannot be separated one from another. The Cyborg is situated in existing (gender) ideologies; however, its constructed, projected and fictional side transgresses them. (Haraway 1991). Such notion of a cyborg can open our understanding of "femininity" and "masculinity" to new meanings, while taking into

account the importance of technologies in the construction of human, i.e. cyborg “personality”.

Also Sadie Plant tries via alternative history to get women closer to the internet and electronic networks. She sees germs of software programs in complicated weaving processes that even (otherwise) misogynistic Sigmund Freud regarded as the only thing by which women contributed to human culture. Ironically (as cyberfeminists often do), Sadie Plant appropriates this assertion and points out that already Ada Lovelace – the Victorian mathematician and daughter of poet lord Byron, when creating the first “program” started from the principles of the weaving loom. Women also stood at the construction of the ENIAC computer therefore there is no reason to question the historical connection between women and technologies (Plant 1997).

The Future is (also) F-e-m-a-i-l

Women’s work with technologies, creation of own websites, participation in the labor market in the field of information and communication industry can be a good strategy of creation of new identities oppositional to stereotypical labels excluding women from computer industry and culture. In this field undergoing great expansion and opening up possibilities for reformulation of gender stereotypes, we should seize these opportunities and stop sending out stereotypical messages about what is appropriate for girls. Even such thing as placing the home computer not into the boy’s room but into some common family space, or deliberate encouragement of girls to work with computers in school can strengthen their self-confidence in mastering computer technologies – which is necessary for women and girls to enter male “coded” spheres. This is the only way not to exclude them from the cyberspace the importance and possibilities of which are increasingly growing.

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¹ CU_SeeMee is a publicly available videoconferencing program. It enables the internet transmission of picture via the web camera and thus to videoconference with other internet users.