2 Video Game Research

A central issue in my own past work has been an address to subjectivity. I have approached this over many years (see Henriques et al., 1984) by bringing together the idea of subjectivity as constituted through a process of subjectification, in which multiple positions are held together through affective unconscious dynamics. This approach has informed previous work on children and the media, notably my work on girls and popular culture (Walkerdine, 1997). What I want to do here is to recap how this work relates to earlier media analysis and to then go on to think about firstly, the debates about the interactivity of video games and secondly, to engage with how new work from the social sciences might help us to think beyond the position I have taken in the past.

As I argued in Chapter 1, in the 1970s, what is now known as Screen Theory was particularly important (d. Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001) because it attempted to understand the ideological place of the media through the production of subjects, using Althusser’s turn to psycho-analysis to provide a theory of the subject. In particular, this work turned to the unconscious identifications afforded by the process of spectatorship. This work was important in pointing to the ways in which masculinity and femininity, far from being stable givens, were the result of a great deal of psychic work, which itself was never resolved. So, for example, analyses of Hollywood Westerns (Neale, 1983) showed how the hero of a Western classically got beaten several times before he triumphed in the end. Neale argued that this screen struggle paralleled the psychic struggle to embody masculinity. The fact that the hero had to get beaten several times shows that masculinity required constant work to appear to become that which was forever elusive. The triumph of the hero at the end of the movie was therefore understood as pleasurable because it appeared to offer resolution to the struggle – I am a man, I am the hero. In this sense then, it was argued
that movies mirrored and captured what Lacan saw as the endless psychic work of masculinity. This work, as I will show, has been important to my thinking about masculinity and video games. However, it is important to note that within media studies this work was criticised for assuming the overwhelming importance of identification with a media text, which assumed a direct relationship between subjectivity and the psychic work of media. Two positions were most frequently put forward. One (Geraghty, 1991) stressed the importance of social fantasy as productive and active, while the other (e.g. Jenkins, 2004) argued that spectators worked creatively with what they had available and turned it into something else (see Chapter 1). Some of this criticism fails to engage with what is really meant by unconscious processes and psychic work, looking too readily to conscious choices made by spectators, while ignoring unconscious affect. However, that aside, this latter work served to make clear that Althusser's idea of a theory of the subject and a simple process of interpellation needs to be complicated and should at least take on board the complex intertextuality and multiple sites in which subjects are located and the active part they play. However, this latter tended to assume, as Jenkins (see Chapter 1) does, that active means rational and that we therefore do not need to take any account of unconscious or affective processes. It is precisely because of the power of such processes that I, together with the co-authors of Changing the Subject (see Walkerdine, 1984), attempted to link Foucauldian multiplicity and subjectification with desire and affect. In this sense, this work allowed the possibility of understanding the ways in which apparatuses of governance position subjects and allowed us to understand how the impossible multiplicity of positions demanded of subjects are held together. Understanding how the media played into this required both an engagement with media texts and a view on how the positions afforded were lived. In this, our work went some way to reconciling the demands of both Screen Theory and television researchers (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001). However, to further complicate things, recent work on new media has stressed that we cannot simply map studies of television and film onto so-called interactive media such as video games.

It is to the concept of interaction that I will now turn. One of the principal issues raised by video game researchers is that because games are interactive, it is impossible to simply use ideas of identification taken from work on film and television. But what does interactive mean in this context? It is a source of some debate amongst video game researchers, with, on the one hand, some researchers describing games as interactive and others suggesting that this is false. I will simply give a flavour of the debate in this context. For example, Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) characterises games as both