Chapter 6

The personal is the political: why feminism is important to experience design

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In their many responses to the media industries, feminism has asked that media producers understand the complexity and diversity of their audiences so that they are addressed in ways which are inclusive rather than simplistic.

While analogue media has improved its capacity to cater for women, the digital world still has lessons to learn and apply in terms designing with consideration to the emotional and personal experiences of women. In particular, interactive television (iTV) offers an illustration of the new forms of gendered digital media production and representation. These are currently male-oriented and lack appeal to women. The particular questions to be addressed in this chapter are:

- what role does gender difference play in understanding audiences?
- using iTV as a case study, how is gender difference designed and manifest?
- how might personalisation speak to diversity while offering inclusiveness? What are some examples?
- how might personalisation be regarded as feminist?

The role of gender

The role of gender has been widely researched in studies of media production, representation and consumption. These areas have been found to be interconnected such that if producers are not representative of the demographic, political and cultural range that can be found in society, then the content they produce also tends to be narrowly constituted. This applies as much to traditional / analogue / broadcast media as it does to digital / interactive media. The role of the television producer, for example, has been described as similar to 'the governor of a small colony' (Tunstall 1993: 4). This is telling in its allusion to the primarily male and white profile of television production. Likewise, such allegations have also been made in relation to newspaper ownership, film and radio production (Leung 2005: 31-33). In turn, this has informed the large amount of work that has been done examining gendered media

representations, that is, the ways in which men and women are depicted stereotypically in the media (Jackson 1993; Williamson 1978; Kaplan 1983; Baehr and Dyer 1987). These studies have found that on television, men largely adopt traditional roles as such as 'breadwinner', 'hero' or 'villain' whilst women mostly play parts that characterize their 'expected' position in society of either 'mother', 'wife' or 'vixen'. Such research has subsequently led to recommendations and calls for action in ensuring that the staff and structures of media organisations reflect the broader community, and informed the changing media landscape that has produced a wider range of contemporary depictions of women.

In the relatively short history of the Internet, it has similarly been found that the dominant group to set norms in the online world are male and white (Kendall 1999: 59, 66). Back in 1993, it was claimed that as much as 95% of computer networks were male. Even in the 21st century, when Internet use has become more pervasive and gender-balanced in mainly Western countries, studies have found online representations of women to be predominantly sexualised (Nakamura 2002) and do not speak to female Internet users (Leung 2005). Pornography remains as one of the primary activities of the Internet. Norman (2004: 43) notes that the design of video games by 'young excitable males' for 'young excitable males' has restricted its potential to appeal to young, excitable females. Even with the advent of social networking, there are sites such as Videosift which are as much as 84% male.

Why does this matter? It is important because it is not only about inclusiveness for the sake of equity, but about markets that are not being served well by the media industries. Furthermore, it is relevant to everyone - men and women - working in any kind of media production as it is concerned with issues of access, accessibility and audiences. In short, it has as much a legal and business objective as one of equality.

What has feminism got to do with it?
Feminism is concerned with investigating and addressing 'the condition of women in a sexist society' (Stanley 1990: 12-15). That is, it is focused on the experiences of and issues affecting women and actively attempts to find solutions to situations of inequality where women are excluded or disadvantaged.

Therefore, feminist responses to the acknowledged lack of women in the IT industry have included the development of projects specifically aimed at providing girls of school age with technical competence and confidence, as well as encouraging them into technology-related education and occupations (Leung 2005: 68-69). Likewise, the film industry has established funding programs with the purpose of training more women as producers, directors, screenwriters, cinematographers and editors (Caine et al 1998: 113). Women's lobby groups have succeeded in making the advertising industry accountable for its representations of women through public forums, regulatory codes and anti-sexism laws (Mann 1989).

Thus, feminist analyses of media industries and representations have resulted in firstly, organisational recognition of gender imbalance at the level of production and management; and secondly, the implementation of equal opportunity and affirmative action policies to rectify this. In time, this has cultivated media content which can be described as feminist in orientation in dealing with issues that affect women, contest traditional portrayals of women, and offer positive depictions and role models.

However, initiatives which tackle gender inequality require just that: initiative - on the part of both individuals and organisations. They need a change in perception on the part of organisations whereby they accept the need to reflect and understand the audiences whom they serve, and that a mismatch between producers and consumers is ultimately detrimental to both parties. The change in the mass media's masculine culture has ultimately been profitable for the media industries (Hartley cited in Caine et al 1998: 220). The exclusion of women, or indeed any major market segment, at the level of production will translate to their absence at the level of consumption, making no business sense. To ignore those markets means that it will eventually cost the organisation to grow them later: any kind of imbalance necessitates significant investment to restore equitable conditions.

The consequences of a non-inclusive outlook are illustrated in a case brought before the Australian Government's Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC 2000) against the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG). The committee was responsible for coordinating all media coverage before, during and after the Olympic Games held in Sydney in 2000. This included

developing a Web site through which tickets could be bought online and which provided information about events which were not covered by traditional broadcast media. Therefore, the site's purpose was to serve the wider global and local public consisting of people who could not travel to Sydney to attend events as well as those who could. The complaint lodged by Bruce Maguire, who is blind, against SOCOG alleged that the Web site was inaccessible to people with impaired vision. It was found that the site did not comply with W3C guidelines, did not have any ALT tags on images, and that a blind user would require the assistance of a sighted person to use it. SOCOG and the company contracted to design the site, IBM, claimed that to address these issues, the organisations 'would have to retrain many of its staff and redraw its entire development methodology', develop a new or separate site altogether at a cost of AUS$2.2 million. SOCOG ignored the ruling that they must take reasonable steps to make their site more accessible and was subsequently fined AUS$20,000.

An ethic of inclusiveness is a matter of acknowledging diversity and plurality of users.

How does this relate to experience design?

Gender is an important consideration when understanding any kind of media audience. Traditional media industries have clearly defined its audiences according to gender and genres. Advertisers claim to comprehensively research and understand their target audiences more than any other form of communication (Mann 1989: 51). Particular genres of television program such as soap opera are heavily gendered in that their audiences are largely female. Similarly, in film, romantic comedy has been identified as a genre which primarily appeals to women. In literature, women's autobiographies, 'a written or verbal personal interpretation of one's life' (Humm 1989: 16) and romance novels (Radway 1984) are popular with female readers. Women's magazines have spawned a range of sub-genres which specifically delineate between and target teenage girls to homemakers to fashion-conscious young professionals. Even in the universe of games, those that have a significant female market (such as The Sims, and SongStar) are distinguishable from those that are not. The rise of 'casual' gaming has been fuelled by women. Casual games are those which can be described as small-scale, simple, self-contained, retro, require minimal

commitment or investment and include puzzles, card games and classics like Pacman. According to casual game distributors such as Microsoft, AOL and Yahoo, most participants are female (Hyman 2004). Across this media landscape, what is common to media experiences that have been designed for women?

Firstly, it should be noted that such experiences have often emerged in response to the exclusion of women in other genres of the media. In the history of television and in comparison with genres such as news and sports, it was soap opera that pioneered shows in which women had the starring role. Likewise, while women's magazines now form a large part of the print media market, most other forms such as computer, sports and business magazines and newspapers have been criticised as male-oriented. Feminist film theorists maintain that even in genres aimed at women, such as romantic comedy, film perpetuates a 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1989) by which women are depicted from a male point of view primarily because it is mostly men behind the movie camera.

Media and genres that have successfully developed female markets foreground and acknowledge the experiences of women. Moreover, personal experience is privileged, and not derided as purely subjective or individual. Rather, personal experiences are regarded as ways of connecting to others. The sharing of experiences is seen as a means for speaking to a group or community. It is in this sense that, as the feminist slogan goes, 'the personal is the political'. That is, personal experience provides an insight into social networks and contexts.

As subjectivity and personal experience are given priority, the need for objectivity has less relevance. Indeed, objectivity is impossible because our perspectives are always personally and emotionally informed. Emotions 'are privileged [in feminism] as powerful sources of knowledge, as forms of cognition, appraisal, judgement or choice, and as tools for grasping the world and changing it.' (Humm 1989: 77). The important role of emotions is not only acknowledged by feminists, but also by psychologists:

'Emotions are inseparable from and a necessary part of cognition. Everything we do, everything we think is tinged with emotion, much of it subconscious. In turn, our emotions change the way we think...' (Norman 2004: 7).

It is the affective or emotional system which is triggered first to give a quick subconscious judgment or first impression of an experience before the cognitive system is activated to interpret or make sense of the situation (ibid 11).

This is applied in televison in soap operas which depict the emotional terrain of life through its (mostly) female characters (Glaessner 1990: 119). The personal experiences of the characters speaks to those of the community of women who form the show's audience: 'television soap operas...are a way of understanding and coping with problems shared by other women' (Nightingale 1990: 36). The characters' experiences form an emotional narrative through which their lives are told and interpreted. Furthermore, the content of soap operas and other female genres as discussed above tend to make sense of the world through the personal and emotional dimensions of family, work and home life, and relationships with men. In relation to online experiences, these issues also resonate in women's blogs, which as a form of personal journal keeping made public, can be likened to autobiography. Such blogs are consistent with the use of diaries in feminist research to record the researcher's feelings and ideas (Humm 1989: 63).

Unlike the other kinds of media mentioned previously, blogs allow direct interaction between the blogger/writer and her readers/audience. A blog gives readers an opportunity to publicly respond to the blogger/writer as well as to each other, enabling a right of reply in one's own voice which is limited or absent altogether in women's magazines, books or soap operas. It is not only these one-to-one relationships which can appeal to a female market. Blogs can speak to, as well as speak from the personal experiences of the readers. It takes the role of personal experience to another dimension, as it facilitates more than one person's story. This sort of personalisation has a lot of potential to appeal to female markets which have not yet been fully realised in digital interactive media.

There is an increasing movement towards personalisation in new technologies. The ability to change the 'skin' of a Web site, to individualise your mobile phone ringtone, to choose the desktop background and screensaver of a computer, to tailor the playlist on your iPod, are all examples of this. However, these types of personalisation are cosmetic and/or functional, and do not necessarily enlist the personal and emotional experiences of the user. They exemplify customisation (choosing from a fixed set of alternatives) rather than the generation of personal meaning or emotional attachment (Norman 2004: 220, 222).

For this reason, there are still many types of technological experiences which do not appeal to female audiences and users. Feminists acknowledge the importance of emotion in 'diverting attention away from instrumental goal-centred issues' (Mumby and Putnam 1992). Emotional design and, therefore, designing for women must go beyond mere utilitarian requirements, to appeal to wants and desires (Norman 2004: 42)

'I have long argued that machines should indeed both have and display emotions...' (ibid 179)

Norman suggests that positive affect can be produced by attributes such as: warmth, light, sweet tastes and smells, soothing sounds, caress, smiles, rhythms, 'attractive' people, symmetry, and round smooth objects (ibid 29). Separately, it has been argued that 'a feminine cognitive style would be artistic, senstive, integrated, deep, intersubjective, empathic, associative, affective, open, personalised, aesthetic and receptive' (Humm 1989: 85). Thus, from both design and feminist perspectives, experiences which are inclusive of and appeal to women should display emotional intelligence as articulated in the abovementioned qualities.

Case study: interactive television
Throughout its analogue history, television has refined the craft of emotional design in its production of programs specifically targeted at female audiences. However, the advent of the digital era has left women largely excluded from the possibilities offered by interactive television. Subscription (or pay) TV does offer a wider menu of channels for women through niche programming, but without the innovation in

interaction that can be seen in male-oriented content. It mirrors the gender disparities that have been identified in relation to the design, development and participation in other technologies, both old (such as broadcast television) and current (such as video games) (Caine et al 1998: 65). Just as e-commerce on the Internet was pioneered through pornography with men as the assumed users, iTV applications seem to perceive men as the remote control operators.

Interactive television refers to digital television services which include interactive applications such as:

- *electronic program guide (EPG)*, in which viewers, via their remote control are able to view upcoming programming schedules and set program reminders for each channel
- *interactive radio*, whereby users can choose a song from a range of music genres via their television set using their remote control
- *casual games* which users can play using their remote control
- *box office*, in which viewers can browse through pay-per-view movie information, before purchasing either by phone, Internet or through their set top box with the remote control
- *personalised television news* which allows users to tailor current affairs programs according to their interests
- *access to email and Internet* via the television (Eronen 2002: 73)

Over and above these applications, viewers also have access to a number of program enhancements. Program enhancements are interactive by nature as viewers can select suitable video or text-based content to obtain more information about the program. Program enhancements are available for use when a program is being broadcast. These include:

- *weather enhancement*, in which users can personalise the weather application to deliver weather information for a specific postcode.
- *sports active*, in which viewers can select different camera angles and views of a football, tennis, cricket, basketball or other sports game. Game statistics are also available for consumption.
- *news active*, in which viewers can select a news topic from an eight screen

mosaic to obtain 'on demand' information.

The inclusion of interactive services and features are designed with the premise of complementing programs. As television is almost universally watched - being more pervasive than the use of computers and mobile phones (Gawlinski 2003: 214) - it follows that interactive services should be implemented evenly with consideration to genre of show and the audience watching it. Gender-specific interactive services are evident, but are predominantly male-oriented: most program enhancements and interactive features are concentrated in the genre of sport (BBC 2005: 18):

'Sports programming is an area which is the preserve of men. Not only is it dominated by masculine sports and male commentators, it occupies a privileged position in the schedules' (Dyer 1987: 8)

More recently, according to a Roy Morgan poll (2006), 73% of men compared with 27% of women were 'very' interested in watching sport on pay TV. Nonetheless, this percentage becomes more gender-balanced for those who are 'quite' or 'somewhat' interested in pay TV sport.

Research examining the processes by which television broadcast companies develop new concepts for programs with interactive features shows that gender is a key factor in how audiences are profiled. As with any new technology, iTV consumers are categorised into four main groups:

- early adopters
- early majority
- late majority
- mass market (Gawlinski 2003: 229).

It is noteworthy that female markets are part of all these groups. However, early adopters are generally personified as male, as in the term 'Gadget Guy':

'The traditional early adopter market can be loosely characterised as 60-80 per cent male, mostly aged 25-34.' (Gawlinski 2003: 231)

Nonetheless, early adopters also include Generation 'i' or 'Y' - that is, socially active teenagers - of whom teenage girls make up a large proportion. Within the early majority group are 'Daytime Dabblers' who are characterised as almost entirely female, active players of iTV games who use iTV differently to their spouses (ibid 232). Indeed, iTV games could also be described as casual games and thus have a similar appeal to women of being intuitive, discrete and requiring minimal learning time. Adult female viewers are perceived as interested in 'domestic reality-based programs, and criminal investigation shows' while their male counterparts watched 'sports and entertainment' (Eronen 2002: 76). Yet Lu (2005: 74) argues that there has been minimal development of drama for iTV despite that this genre commands loyal followings. Television producers suggested that news and current affairs could be separated into a 'Women's corner' and 'Men's corner' and accessed accordingly. However, it was also proposed that older female viewers should not be compelled to use the interactive features:

'We cannot force the features of interactive television on these people, we rather tell them what to do if they have an interest to participate in the TV show.' (Eronen 2002: 77)

Women (rather than men) of a mature age are seen as needing instruction when it comes to using iTV, contrary to the BBC's findings that its use is not gender-specific (BBC 2005: 20). This demonstrates two divergent approaches. One begins with the objective of serving the wider public, irrespective of varying levels of adoption and use. The BBC's guidelines for designing iTV services are explicitly inclusive in this respect:

'The audience of our services is diverse. All services should be easy to use for the audience, from the young through to the elderly. One in 30 of our audience has a visual impairment.' (BBC 2005: 2)

In this way, it is possible to identify new audiences and uses of iTV which can then be grown in the future. The second approach takes as its departure point what is already known about traditional broadcast television audiences and applies this genre / gender

classification to the design of iTV services. That is, by undertanding the well-established patterns by which people watch television, interactive features designed for particular audiences like women have a better chance of being adopted and subsequently, for channels to receive a return on investment. For example, knowledge of how women use video cassette recorders provides a model for how iTV services like video-on-demand or personal video recorders could successfully cater for female markets (Gawlinski 2003: 213). Furthermore, this means that possibilities are not constrained by having to design for universal access (ibid 215).

A feminist approach to designing iTV services acknowledges women as a vital to the growth of iTV markets and respond accordingly to the gender gaps which currently exist in the development and consumption of iTV. In short, it argues that the consideration of gender in the design of iTV experiences should be paramount.

'An interactive television service designed purely for usability may allow viewers to perform tasks, but risks leaving them feeling disconnected, uninvolved and without a sense of allegiance.' (Gawlinski 2003: 201)

Experience design with a feminist orientation understands that utility and usability are not sufficient to engage women in the adoption and use of iTV. Rather, a sense of affiliation with a community must be provided as well as opportunities to share experiences with others. This means giving women a voice through which they can contribute feedback and exercise control over how they represent themselves. It is about building capacity for personal and emotional connection in addition to the personalisation of communal experience.

'...the medium is ripe for projects that take advantage of iTV's potential to create a more personal, relevant experience... (Curran 2003: 20)

There are now pay TV channels orientated to female audiences, such as Arena, Hallmark and Channel W, with the occasional interactive application for their programming, such as one associated with the *Sex in the City* series. This asked questions of the audience in regard to the plot and characters.

In contrast to fictional lives and people, talk shows often appeal to the 'reality' of women's existence and feminine cognitive styles of being 'artistic, sensitive, integrated, deep, intersubjective, empathic, associative, affective, open, personalised, aesthetic and receptive' (Humm 1989: 85). The genre has the potential to faciliate a sense of community connection and participation. The online domain has surpassed iTV in this respect, with social networking sites such as *MySpace* and *Facebook* that allow women to reach out to friends, join groups and generate networks of similar interest. Yet there are few examples of iTV enhancements that have been developed for this genre (Lu 2005: 72) which would further contribute to a 'politics of the personal', despite that in the free-to-air (FTA) TV channels, women are traditionally targeted with morning talk shows.

In the niche channel environment of pay TV, interactive experiences developed for women focus on topics that are traditionally feminine such as horoscopes, cooking and decorating. Such superficial attempts to feminise iTV, combined with the absence of interactive enhancements to popular female genres such as drama and talk shows, are indicative of the iTV industry's failure to understand female audiences. It confirms Lu's (2005: 184) contention that in 'the design of iTV applications, the user-centred approach is rarely practiced'.

The lack of success of iTV applications aimed at women needs to be read in the context of what female audiences are prepared to invest in. The increasing subscriptions to pay TV channels such as Arena, Hallmark and W, as well as decreasing free-to-air audiences suggest that women are prepared to part with their money for content targeted especially at them. Any interactive applications or services (such as voting or competitions) offered with these respective channels generally incur additional costs. But only by requiring payment and user authorisation, can such enhancements be effectively measured. In other words, a 'return path' from the user's set top box back to the broadcaster is necessary before any kind of degree of success or popularity can be calculated. However, there are also many iTV applications that are free, do not have an associated charge and do not need a 'return path': by what criteria can these be evaluated given that there is no way for the broadcaster to know whether they are being used and how frequently? This is unlike the evaluation of Web sites which can offer detailed reporting on site traffic, unique visits and page hits. By

contrast, iTV channels seem to invest in the development of interactive features without similar means to gauge their performance. The time and effort to design and produce an iTV application may be easily wasted: if the sponsor does not immediately see a high response rate, they will not repeat the exercise.

Therefore, it is likely that much iTV consumption by women is largely 'invisible' in that they may be using applications which are free and do not require a 'return path'. This invisibility means that supposed 'unsuccessful' ventures such as *Fat Cow Motel*, an interactive soap opera on Australian television, have to be questioned. That is, its apparent lack of success may not be due to minimal uptake or use, but rather the difficulty of measuring uptake or use. It is difficult to conclude from such data that 'women are not interested in iTV'. Their under-representation as iTV consumers is comparable to women bearing the bulk of unpaid activity in the economy, in that they are engaged in work that is unacknowledged and unquantifiable (Baker 2007). Women may be highly active participants in iTV but it is just not seen.

As the key financial decision-makers in households, women are not only subscribing to pay TV for their families, but for themselves. Given that they are willing to be targeted through 'women's channels', the logical extension of this niche programming is personalisation, whereby the broadcaster can target households or individuals through tailored messages sent to the viewer's set top box, and viewers will be able to revisit programs outside of broadcast times or see unedited versions. Personal video recorders (PVRs) such as TiVO are an example of this, allowing users to bookmark programs and based on this, predicts and records content that the user may like. TiVO also enables users to select movies according to actor, look up all the roles they have played, browse through their photo galleries, as well as filter results by genre. The obligations of women's unpaid work (such as cooking, cleaning and childcare) means that the ability to 'timeshift', to interact with a program in a flexible manner, is personally appealing and relevant to women. This includes being able to pause and rewind live broadcasts, skip advertisements, in addition to scheduling recordings online (and not just using the remote control). This type of interactivity can be defined as 'female-friendly' in that has been designed with consideration to women's emotional role as primary carers and homemakers. As Halleck (1991: 227) maintains,

technologies create communities of interest, and women must be considered in this balancing act between social equity and digital content.

'Television is a shared and gendered medium; so is video;' (Silverstone 1990: 179)

Summary

- New technological experiences such as iTV ought to be designed with an inclusive outlook that considers the wider community as well as communities of interest
- Designers need to be wary of gender imbalances in modes of production, representation and consumption of interactive experiences - particularly where technologies are still in early stages of adoption
- In designing women's interactions with new technologies such as iTV, an understanding of women's experiences with preceding technologies and how these are appropriated in their everyday lives is necessary
- Feminist approaches to experience design privilege the personal and emotional, appealing to feminine cognitive styles of being 'artistic, sensitive, integrated, deep, intersubjective, empathic, associative, affective, open, personalised, aesthetic and receptive' (Humm 1989: 85)
- Designers must take into account the constraints on women's time resulting from them bearing a disproportionate amount of unpaid work.

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