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Playing Gender?

Gender Construction through Children's Crime Fiction Games

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Playing Gender?

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- 1 “We are no longer like our partisan elders; by and large we have won the game”, Simone de Beauvoir declared the overall victory in the game of women's*¹ equality more than 70 years ago while analyzing the social mechanisms of the development of gender (Beauvoir 1953 [1949]: XXVII).² However, contemporary discourse – spanning newspapers, magazines, academic articles, and the vast expanses of the internet – still shows persisting issues such as the Gender Pay Gap, gender-specific academic choices, and instances of sexist aggression up to discussions of the Gender Health Gap and Female Pleasure Gap. Since Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* the discourse has expanded to encompass gender identities beyond the traditional male*-female* binary, considerations of linguistic representation, nuanced beauty standards, and a critical examination of images of masculinity. Although decades have passed since social and legal, even constitutional gender equality was established in various societies, gender remains an enduring facet of social inequality. The expression of one's personality still elicits, at the very least, a sense of disquiet when it transgresses widely acknowledged gender boundaries, for instance when it challenges clothing norms or embraces non-binary gender identities, especially in the Western hemisphere. However, the free expression of personality becomes significantly more attainable when societal expectations tied to gender are acknowledged as socially constructed and consequently become less rigid.
- 2 Social constructionist perspectives underpin this understanding: conceptions of gender, along with their associated (gender-specific) (behavioral) norms, are shaped by and depend on cultural beliefs and thus are always in principle changeable (cf. West/Zimmerman 2009). Gender-related perceptions and beliefs are shaped during childhood and adolescence in particular (cf. Elsen 2020: 107–111, 165–179), and their formation occurs as children and adolescents, often subconsciously, encounter gender-specific expectations and norms from their surroundings. As Elsen (2020: 103) says, “The parental home and other groups and institutions involved in socialization, as well as the media, provide information and react to behavior, generating, reinforcing, and internalizing stereotypes.”³ According to the *doing gender* approach, gender notions are in a perpetual state of (re)production, as all behavior is evaluated against gender categories – making the *non*-production of gender impossible (cf. West/Zimmerman 1987). Living in a society where gender serves as a ubiquitous category of identity and structure, children and adolescents inevitably acquire notions of gender. However, they possess the capacity to learn that these notions are culturally contingent and, therefore, subject to change, thereby engaging with the inherently constructive nature of the gender category. In the educational realm, the inescapable process of *learning gender* can be shaped and guided through a deliberate approach to *teaching gender* (cf. Bartsch/Wedl 2015). In conclusion, this means that images and conceptions of gender as they are (re-)produced in quite a tangible manner in popular media among others need reflection. This especially applies to media that directly or primarily address children and adolescents.

3 In this essay I will therefore introduce two children's series that are quite popular in German-speaking countries and then exemplarily apply a model that shows dimensions of gender construction and their interactions in (fictional) media focusing on the gamified adaptations as smartphone applications. I will conclude with some ideas on how to address the related gender issues in educational contexts like schools.

1. *Die drei ???* and *Die drei !!!* – A Popular Phenomenon

4 The two kids' detective series, *Die drei Fragezeichen* (lit. 'The Three Question Marks', originally invented by Robert Arthur in the USA under the title *The Three Investigators*) and *Die drei Ausrufezeichen* ('The Three Exclamation Marks'), can be seen as tripled phenomena in popular culture due to the crime genre, the seriality, and the classification as children's literature. The protagonists of *Die drei ???* are three male* teenagers, in the early episodes roughly 12 or 13 years old, in the later ones approximately 17, living in the fictional town of Rocky Beach, California. They investigate crimes like theft or kidnapping, solve riddles or get to the bottom of mysteries. While this is a topic that invites literary scrutiny, it undeniably presents an interesting subject in media education. *Die drei ???* has been on the German scene since 1968 (in the USA since 1964, exclusively in Germany since 1991; for the series' backstory, see Rodenwald 2019) and can be described as an intergenerational sensation. The audio plays have such a pull that live performances fill large venues across Germany (see Rodenwald 2020), and as of 2023, a new movie, *Die drei ??? – Erbe des Drachen* ('The Three ??? – Legacy of the Dragon') (Muesch/Dünschede 2023), hit the theaters. As of late 2023, 229 book and 224 audio play episodes (plus various specials) have been released, plus three movies, several smartphone/computer games, and other products as part of the media franchise. For younger readers, there is the spin-off series *Die drei ??? Kids*. Since 2006, there is also the female* counterpart, *Die drei !!!*, with three female* protagonists at the age of 13 and 14 living in an unnamed fictional German city, solving crimes as well. Like the original series, the books are published by Franckh-Kosmos-Verlag, and the audio plays by EUROPA. This series boasts 107 book and 85 audio play episodes, along with various digital and analog products. Both series are hugely popular among children and teenagers (cf. mpfs 2021: 29–30).

5 But alongside the excitement, criticism has been growing in recent years. Critics have pointed out issues with the representation of identity categories such as 'class' and 'race', especially in the older episodes, as well as gender-related concerns. Katharina Brunner et al. observe, "Girls hardly play a role in the *Drei ???*, and women only do when dealing with catering" (Brunner et al. 2019: Seite). Almut Schnerring and Sascha Verlan, on the other hand, draw a critical comparison between *Die drei ???* and *Die drei !!!*:

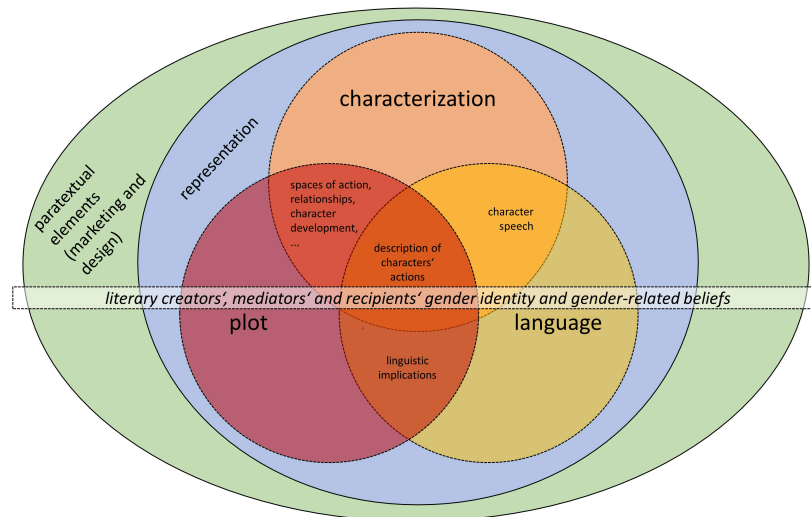
[W]hile the headquarters of 'Die drei Fragezeichen' is in an exciting junkyard with a secret passage, the girls meet in a horse stable for their discussions. The three female detectives take aerobics classes, talk about horses, makeup, and styling, show interest in older boys, and don't want to gain weight. [...] The 'Die drei Fragezeichen' counterpart foregrounds the girls' relationships, but this comes at the expense of the plot; it rarely gets genuinely exciting. At least the traditional image of the modest and anxious girl is replaced by the portrayal of the modern girl: cheeky, clever, and self-confident. (Schnerring/Verlan 2014, p. 147)

6 The coexistence of both series, connected not only by similarities in the series' titles, narrative structures, and marketing but also through explicit references within, especially, the early *Die drei !!!* volumes, allows for an interesting comparison regarding gender-related assumptions. The creation of female* identification options in the realm of children's crime literature is initially to be welcomed in terms of

equality. However, this comes with differences in the series' conception and marketing. As I am going to point out, *Die drei ???* can be described as an androcentric children's crime series, where children who happen to be male* – because boys* or men* were considered the norm for a long time, and girls* or women* as 'the other' – act as detectives, mostly not in gender-specific contexts. On the other hand, *Die drei !!!* is a differential feminist girls'* crime series following the motto 'Girls* can (now) do it too – just differently' (for different forms of feminism see [Pimminger 2019](#)).

2. A Gendered Media Analysis

Figure 1. A Model to Analyze Gender in (Fictional) Media (my visualization).



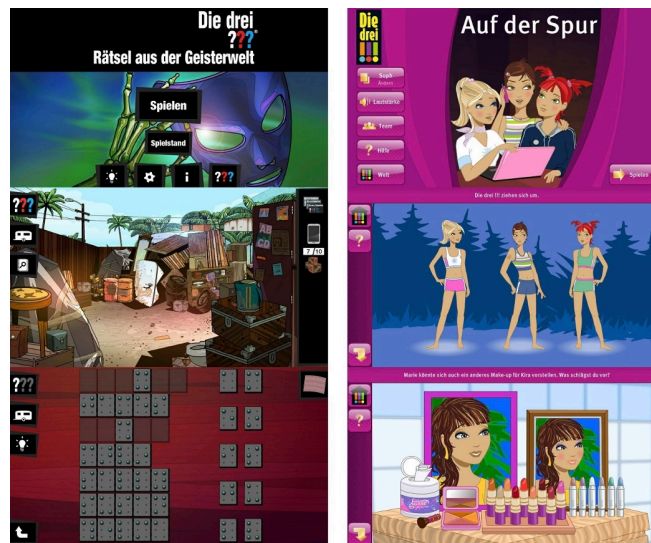
- 7 Gender is represented and reproduced in various dimensions, as I develop in my PhD thesis. The outermost is the one that is most likely to be overlooked when dealing with gender in media, because it deals more with the *outer* shape of media rather than with their content: the paratextual elements. In accordance with [Genette \(1989\)](#) and [Ewers \(2012\)](#), for children's media this means non-content signals towards mediators like book retailers, librarians, or parents as well as the intended young readers themselves, and takes shape in cover design, cover text, title, advertising etc. Especially in popular (children's) media this includes the association of different media like books, audio books, audio plays, movies, games, and other non-book articles like toys. Applied to *Die drei ???* and *Die drei !!!* the relevance regarding gender is most evident in the cover designs: deviating from the classic black design with mostly mystical-dangerous motifs in the original series, the covers of *Die drei !!!* stand out with their changing, often soft colors. The focus is always on the three protagonists, slim, well-styled, with big eyes and usually open mouths, while the details of the case are only hinted at through accessories or the background, although after a design relaunch this last point has become more balanced.

Figure 2. Left: Cover of volume 200, *Die drei ???* (2021), KOSMOS.
 Right: Cover of volume 100, *Die drei !!!* (2023), KOSMOS.



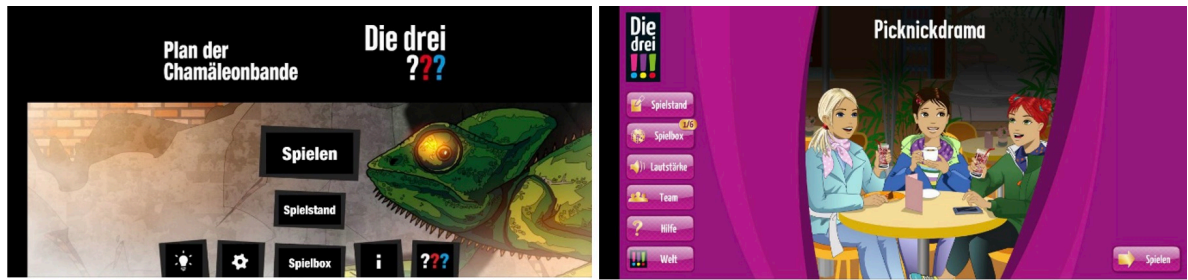
- 8 Noticeably, the themes in *Die drei !!!* often revolve around fashion, animals, or love, whereas *Die drei ???* tackle puzzles or conspiracies in various settings. Regarding media association, the Franckh-Kosmos-Verlag also offers *detective kits* (some kind of experimentation kits) as part of the *Die drei ???* media franchise – this category is absent in *Die drei !!!*, but their website features, among others, cooking, baking, and crafting tips (cf. Franckh-Kosmos-Verlag 2023, 2023a). The target audience for *Die drei !!!* is explicitly stated: the series is aimed at “girls aged 10 and above” (Franckh-Kosmos-Verlag 2023, subsection “Kim, Franzi, and Marie”), whereas *Die drei ???* only set the age recommendation without naming a gender.
- 9 The cases of the two detective trios are also available as mobile and PC games: as point and click adventures with integrated minigames. The player has to take a close look at various locations, find objects and use them wisely in order to make progress. To solve the case, additional tasks such as Sudokus or arranging picture snippets have to be solved. At an earlier stage of this study, one app per series was played: *Die drei ??? Rätsel aus der Geisterwelt* (“The Three ??? Riddles from the Spirit World”) (USM 2016) and *Die drei !!! Auf der Spur* (“The Three !!! On the Track”) (USM 2017). It could be stated that the *Drei ???* game took significantly longer to play and was elaborated not only visually but also auditorily, with the original speakers from the audio plays, which is reflected in the price (€ 7.99 as opposed to € 4.99). The graphic design aligns with the general design concepts of the series, and the choice of pink as base color for the *Drei !!!* game underlined the gendered target group orientation. Due to the long history of the series and the consequently intergenerational reception it is possible that besides children, adult players are also anticipated in the production process of the *Drei ???* games.

Figure 3. Screenshots from the apps *Die drei ??? Rätsel aus der Geisterwelt* (USM 2016) und *Die drei !!! Auf der Spur* (USM 2017).



- 10 Entering the intersected dimensions of plot, characterization, and language it became clear that in the *Drei ???* game, much more complicated actions or sequences of actions were required for progress. There were several characters, and these were more detailed, whereas for example the family of the missing girl in the *Drei !!!* game was not characterized beyond the role of relatives. The *Drei ???* app tended to involve activities typically considered as male* such as changing car tires or shooting at bottles, most of the tasks in the *Drei !!!* app were stereotypically female*: sorting the manga collection, choosing a suitable outfit, or styling from a photo.
- 11 The mini games were also much more challenging in the *Drei ???* game when they are comparable. In both games, for example, square puzzle pieces had to be arranged in such a way that an overall picture is created – in the *Drei !!!* rope pieces in four different shapes, in the *Drei ???* a circuit board with complex patterns. Also, the *Drei ???* game required real memory skills, such as transcribing names in Braille or dialing a phone number from the phone book without turning back the page with the necessary information. As the apps were recommended for a similar age group, but the one specifically for girls* was lower in quality, scope, and task level, this was an extremely dissatisfying finding with regard to the reproduction of gender stereotypes, implying that girls* need or want significantly shorter and easier games than a non-gendered group of the same age.
- 12 For this essay, two apps published more recently were examined in detail to confirm or qualify the earlier findings: *Die drei ??? Plan der Chamäleonbande* (“The three ??? Plan of the Chameleon Gang”) (USM 2022) und *Die drei !!! Picknickdrama* (USM 2021).
- 13 At first sight, the findings regarding graphic design can be corroborated, as the starting screens show. Plot and tasks will now be described in more detail.

Figure 4. Home screens of the two apps (USM 2021, 2022).



Die drei ??? Plan der Chamäleonbande

- 14 *Die drei ??? Plan der Chamäleonbande* consists of eight chapters framed by a purely narrative audiovisual intro and outro. In a self-experiment, it took about 16 hours to play through the app, about five hints outside of the game were used (taken from a playthrough video on YouTube). Like in the earlier game, the story was created visually by still images with some smaller aspects moving (e.g. lips, when a character is talking) and auditorily by a narrator and the characters' voices. The plot of the game is to investigate a series of burglaries possibly connected to the tour of two famous musicians by following their trip from Los Angeles to San Francisco. It shows a high level of intermedial references within the series as well as in relation to other pop-cultural aspects.
- 15 In the dimension of representation there are twelve male* characters, five of them teenagers, including the protagonists Justus (in the US-American original series he was called Jupiter), Peter and Bob, who are represented by voices, but not shown. Four more male* adults are mentioned, but don't appear on scene; in addition, the narrator's voice is male*. Six characters are female*, two of them teenagers, two more women* and one girl* are mentioned. So, males* are represented about twice as often as females*. It is also interesting that analyzing the whole audio play series as a reference there is an average of 31 % females* (excluding the three main characters, who feature in every episode), so 33 % (on scene) females* in this app respectively 40 % excluding the three main characters is a comparatively balanced gender ratio. Additionally, most of the key figures of the crime story are male: the three investigators, obviously, their client, the two musicians, whose tour is abused for criminal actions, and the thief and his client – so crime is assigned to male characters. The crime story itself without the side stories and complications would basically work with this core cast.⁴
- 16 Considering the characters, a positive aspect is that Bob's mother – who is usually portrayed as mother or wife – appears as an estate agent responsible for a complex transfer of a complete house from Los Angeles to San Francisco this time, and according to her own statement earns an important sum of money in doing so. However, apart from that, the female* characters are mostly weak or annoying: Heidi Kattler, a blogger from Germany (displayed as overweight and wearing a traditional Bavarian 'Dirndl'), keeps interfering with the three investigators and even blackmails them to gain more followers. Kelly, Peter's girlfriend, is jealous because Peter spends much time with his best friend Jeffrey. (Peter, on the other hand, has no idea what his girlfriend's interests are.) They solve the situation, but this takes an exhaustingly huge amount of time during which Peter and thus the player cannot work on the case. The elderly vineyard owner Lydia Green, as other figures in the game known from the episode *Die drei ??? und der grüne Geist* ('The Three ??? and the Green Ghost') (Arthur 1975 [1965 in the USA]), seems to some degree more independent and self-confident than in the original case, but has to be rescued by the three (underage) detectives, when she irrationally and

impulsively runs into a forest fire to rescue a little girl who later turns out to have been safe the whole time. This also takes a lot of time during which the actual criminal case stagnates. The male* characters show a wider range of functions, reaching from protagonist to antagonist, covering client, helpers, victims, and criminals. Justus, described as overweight during the whole series, is again exposed to jokes about his body and even has to wear a corset to disguise himself as somebody else in chapter 8. Neither male* nor female* figures (apart from Justus, Peter and Bob) can be honestly described as rounded figures and none of them significantly develops throughout the story, ignoring Kelly's and Jeffrey's reconciliation as well as the fact that the musician Ivan Rubinsky is actually impersonated by a fraud holding the real Rubinsky captive. The only surprising turn is that the burglar in disguise committed all the crimes because his client promised him a treatment for his albinism. An aspect uncommon for the franchise is the homosexual relationship between the musicians Robin Lavander and (the real) Ivan Rubinsky that is hinted at several times in the plot (for example through the fact that they play at a festival that is all decorated with rainbow flags or that they share a house), but is only confirmed in the outro when they are depicted holding hands. This as well as the pride festival is not problematized or stressed in any way, and is thus represented as something normal.

- 17 There are examples for dealing with gender or gendered expectations, for example when Bob is supposed to fetch groceries from a (modified) hearse in chapter 1 and is told “now don't play the wimp” or a comment about how dangerously distracting women* are in chapter 3. Overall, explicit gendered assumptions are quite limited and also in regard to other dimensions of identity, e. g. race/class, there are some hints of reflecting the original episode from the 60s/70s when in chapter 7 Bob comments on the Mexican vineyard workers: “How simple the huts and how superstitious their inhabitants were on our first visit! I bet most people today can only shake their heads at that.”

Figure 5. Exemplary screenshots from *Die drei ??? Plan der Chamäleonbande* (USM 2022).



- 18 Overall, there are few (but some) gender-specific comments or activities throughout the plot. Gender relations are reproduced by the constellation of characters and the male dominance therein rather than on the surface of the game. Something similar can be said about the activities the player has to accomplish by pointing and clicking (and collecting and using) as well as in minigames. For example, the player, always from the perspective of one of the three investigators, has to collect locusts (to feed a chameleon) or guitars (to gain information from the client and afterwards the trust of Robin Lavander), find, sort and

repair objects connected to old cases, secretly investigate and document the musicians' house, choose and buy books under certain conditions, explore and evaluate the area of a scene, save paintings from an approaching fire, collect information, build a camera obscura etc. Compared to the game from 2016, there are more narrative parts and longer and more frequent dialogues. The activities seem to be less action-oriented; the whole plot has a weaker dynamic. The minigames comprise sorting games based on shapes and/or sounds, a 3D puzzle, cloze tests, anagrams, conducting a dialogue by choosing the right topics, inspecting a picture for certain aspects, a game similar to table tennis, shooting at moving targets (with water to extinguish a fire), moving through labyrinths, sometimes with obstacles and antagonists, bringing pictures or picture fragments into the right order and disguising Justus by choosing the right requisites at the right time. Some of these minigames can be coped with by trial and error, most demand at least some level of concentration and/or thought. The ambition seems to be lower than in the game of 2016. The game is recommended "for players aged 10 and above" (Google Play Store 2023).

Die drei !!! Picknickdrama

- 19 The game *Die drei !!! Picknickdrama* is recommended "for young female detectives aged 8 and above" (Google Play Store 2023a) and is thus suitable for younger children than the *Drei ???* game, which should be kept in mind when comparing the two. The titles arouse significantly different associations: while the *Drei ???* game refers to some unknown plan and a (probably criminal) gang named after an animal that is able to make itself more or less invisible, the title *picnic drama* suggests a rather comfy setting where something goes wrong, which seems to be a lot less exciting.
- 20 The *Drei !!!* game consists of five chapters, and in a self-experiment it took about 6 hours to play through the app. The initial situation of the plot is that the three detectives Kim, Franzi, and Marie are sitting in a café, referring to the episode *Voller Einsatz für die Erde* ('Full Commitment to the Earth') (Vogel 2020). They talk about Franzi's mother's farm café when she promptly calls because two guests have complained about her picnic recommendation after their dog was allegedly attacked by a predator in a meadow.
- 21 There are six male* characters, two of these Kim's younger twin brothers, plus one more who is only mentioned. Seven are female*, three of them the protagonists, one more, again, only mentioned. The ratio of female* (on scene) characters is thus at 54 %, excluding the main characters it is 40 % compared to an average of 38 % throughout the entire audio play series. The younger twin brothers are mostly annoying and slow down the main story line like Kelly in the *Drei ???* game. Among the adults, there is a mostly balanced gender relationship: the three investigators consult one female* and two male* experts, additionally there is a female* gossip journalist who is explicitly and implicitly criticized for her style of journalism, but if her aim is gossip journalism, she is doing her job successfully. An imbalanced relationship is present in Pauline Eckar and Lennart Frommknecht, both at the edge of adulthood.

logical foundation from time to time – for example when the three investigators want to stick some torn-out pages into a book and instead of looking for glue (or simply read the torn-out pages without fixing them), they awkwardly collect flour, water, and salt to mix their own glue. In the further course of the plot, the players need to gain information by bringing the right objects to the right people, help Franzi's dad, a vet, during the medical treatment of a dog, collect trash, build an insect hotel, drive away the annoying gossip journalist using a spider, repair an educational board for bird calls, get an old mill running to sharpen scissors (!), clean their headquarters, create posters, examine a house and confront the criminal. Some of these activities clearly show educational or pedagogical aspirations, e.g. encouraging the players to engage in environmental protection. However, they mostly address attitude and not competence or knowledge. This is a crucial difference from the 2017 game, but this article will not evaluate this phenomenon and its implementation. This educational approach also shows in some of the minigames which try to provide a gamified surface for the activities mentioned above: to build the insect hotel, for example, a simple sudoku has to be solved. Some of the minigames can be solved by trial and error, compared to the *Drei ???* they are easier, but some demand an amount of concentration, skill or patience that can be a challenge (in a positive way) for younger children. There are some activities traditionally considered more feminine* like cleaning, painting, or dealing with clothes as in a minigame with the task description “Kim, Franzi and Marie are dressed far too lightly. Equip them with warm clothes and pay attention to the order. What belongs where? What suits each type? What doesn't work at all? None of the three will wear anything that doesn't fit.” The *Drei ???* games contain similar minigames, but they are labeled differently – usually they must disguise themselves for their investigation and styles or “types” are not relevant. Additionally, in such tasks Justus, Peter and Bob are shown only as shapes, their real looks are left to the imagination. Kim, Franzi and Marie are shown frequently, and they all meet current Western beauty standards, being very slender, having symmetrical faces with big eyes etc. (Also, they are all white.)

Conclusion

- 24 Firstly, the two games cannot be compared to each other in every detail as they address overlapping, but not identical age groups. Secondly, their concepts differ in some points: the *Drei ???* game focuses on storyline(s), is much more narrative and deals with a crime that is frequently represented by acute threats and evolves during a road trip on the US west coast. The *Drei !!!* game focuses on minigames connected by mostly harmless activities in everyday surroundings with affirmative educational approaches – it is more about the three protagonists than about a crime. Compared to the games from 2016/17, the 2021/22 games are closer to each other regarding quality, tension and level of difficulty, but there are still major discrepancies.
- 25 From the producers' perspective there might be reasons for these differing concepts and designs that are not (only) connected to the gender of their target group. However, consumers see that there is the black original with the criminal cases and then there is this pink, shorter, cheaper, and easier version for girls*. This can lead to the reproduction of beliefs about girls* having different interests, needs, color preferences and intellectual competences. Patterns like the *Drei ???*–*Drei !!!* duality occur frequently in marketing for children, e.g. the Surprise Egg ('Ü-Ei' in German-speaking countries, a chocolate egg with a small toy inside to assemble) that was originally for children regardless of their gender and was then complemented by the pink 'girls' surprise' with a small toy that does not need putting together (cf. Mecheril/Thoma 2018: 113–114).

In toy and book stores, too, it is easier to find sections for girls* and boys* than gender-neutral sections for children (cf. Brendel-Perpina 2020: 37; Bartsch/Wedl 2015: 13). It is therefore beneficial to address and reflect the issue with children.

3. Gender Reflection in the Educational Context

- 26 The two chosen series work well across different levels of secondary school, making them suitable for younger students who may actively follow the series and older students who can critically reflect on their childhood media consumption in terms of socialization processes. This extends beyond traditional literary or media education contexts to encompass interdisciplinary educational objectives anchored, for example, in the Bavarian curriculum for all schools and subjects like values education, political awareness, vocational orientation, and self-directed consumer behavior (everyday competence and life economics) (cf. ISB 2023). Apart from the analysis of paratextual aspects and media networks concerning gender-related marketing strategies, the gender category can also be explored across the dimensions of representation, character portrayal, plot, and language, creating a stronger link to literary didactic aspects – in various media forms from books to smartphone games.
- 27 Within the dimension of ‘representation’ shown in the model analysis above, students can, for instance, approach the series through a research-oriented lens. They can read, play or listen to an episode, apply the Bechdel-Wallace Test (cf. Rughiniş/Rughiniş/Humă 2016), and/or quantitatively examine occupational distribution. With class sizes of up to 30 students, thoughtful observations about the series’ conception can be made when every student analyzes one episode. In the context of politics and society classes, comparisons can be drawn between horizontal (subject-related) and vertical (related to leadership positions and income) gender inequality in real-world occupational distribution, with discussions of the reasons behind these differences. Given the long history of the *Drei ???* series, a diachronic perspective is also suitable, focusing on evolving portrayals of gender over the last few decades.
- 28 The intertwined categories of ‘characterization’, ‘plot’, and ‘language’ can be explored through action- and production-oriented tasks. For instance, students can reenact an audio play or game scene with reversed role assignments (male* characters portrayed as female* and vice versa) or rewrite text passages along these lines. This exploration can reveal points of confusion and areas where students might assume there are changes needed in attributions or plot besides the mere change of the characters’ gender, which may lead to a discussion of the reasons behind this impulse. Analytical questions can play a crucial role in visualizing usually unspoken rules of the fictional world: in what spaces do they act, what hierarchies and dependencies exist, and how do characters develop throughout the plot? Language usage can also be critically examined, thus addressing linguistic asymmetries (e.g. the so-called generic masculine in the German language) or gender-related implications. Creative tasks can be linked with art and music classes, encouraging students to envision what the cover of a *Drei ???* book or starting screen of a game would look like if designed in the style of *Drei !!!* and vice versa. Similarly, students can explore how the title song of *Drei !!!* audio plays (it starts with “Girls / see many things differently, / can do some things better, / always stay on the ball”) might sound without referencing gender.

- 29 When critically engaging with popular series like the ones under consideration as outlined above, it is crucial to approach primary literature with respect. If students feel that their reading preferences or preferred media are being dismissed, this may negatively impact both their willingness to actively engage in the lesson and their overall reading motivation. Given the sensitivity of students to developmental and potentially culture-related factors, discussing gender requires a nuanced approach.
- 30 It is also crucial to ensure that addressing the gender category doesn't lead students to assign more significance to it than is already the case. Therefore, following Hannelore Faulstich-Wieland's three-step process of dramatization – reflection – de-dramatization is essential:
- To consciously focus on the gender category, it's often necessary to first dramatize gender, highlighting differences and exposing everyday doing gender situations. However, this step must be followed by reflection (identifying where exactly the differences lie and what justifies them) and, consequently, de-dramatization. (Faulstich-Wieland et al. 2008: 11)
- 31 Consequently, de-dramatizing can consist in allowing children to design a game (or book, or movie, ...) both graphically and in terms of content and level of difficulty that they believe can appeal to all (or at least: most) children of their age. In any case, there should be enough room for (self) reflection, open thought, and self-expression, creating a trustful atmosphere without judgement. Being a boy* and liking horses is as fine as liking the color blue, and a girl* preferring the color pink is as fine one as liking football. When children can accept themselves regardless of gender marketing strategies or similar gender conceptions, we will have made a huge progress towards gender equality and the free development of young personalities.

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Notes

- 1 Since this text deals with the category of gender understood as cultural constructions, meaning that terms such as ‘female’ and ‘male’ do not have a fixed signified, a * is used for gender designations in order to make the constructed character visible and to counteract a fixed meaning of the category of gender.
- 2 Introduction and didactic conclusion of this article are based on earlier publications (Schuhmacher 2023; 2024).
- 3 All quotations in German have been translated by the author.



4 For further aspects that may be addressed within the dimension of representation as well as explanations and examples for the other dimensions see [Schuhmacher 2023](#).

Abstract

The “Die drei ???” and “Die drei !!!” series are popular crime series for children and young people in German-speaking countries. The fact that the latter “Die drei !!!” series is primarily aimed at girls suggests an analysis of media networks from a gender-theoretical perspective. This article focuses on two apps in which the users play and solve a criminal case with the protagonists. Imbalances regarding the construction of gender-related ideas can be observed on various levels: in terms of content, in the portrayal of the characters, but also in the relationship between game, plot, graphic design, and the target audience. Nevertheless, or rather precisely because of this, there are also didactic and methodological starting points for literature lessons.

Keywords: The Three Question Marks, The Three Exclamation Marks, Gender, Apps, Media, Media didactics, seriality, children's and young adult literature

Zusammenfassung

„Die drei ???“ und „Die drei !!!“ sind im deutschsprachigen Raum beliebte kinder- bzw. jugendliterarische Krimiserien. Die Adressierung der später entstandenen „Die drei !!!“ vorwiegend an Mädchen legt eine Analyse der Medienverbände aus einer geschlechtertheoretischen Perspektive nahe. In diesem Beitrag stehen zwei Apps im Fokus, in denen die Rezipient:innen mit den Protagonist:innen eine Kriminalfall erspielen. Disbalancen im Hinblick auf die Konstruktion geschlechterbezogener Vorstellungen zeigen sich auf verschiedenen Ebenen: Inhaltlich in der Darstellung der Figuren, aber auch im Verhältnis zwischen (Spiel-, Handlungs- und grafischer) Ausgestaltung und adressierter Zielgruppe. Dennoch, oder besser: gerade deswegen ergeben sich auch didaktisch-methodische Anknüpfungspunkte für den Literaturunterricht.

Schlagwörter: Die drei Fragezeichen, Die drei Ausrufezeichen, Gender, Apps, Medien, Mediendidaktik, Serialität, Kinder- und Jugendliteratur

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