Gender and Video Games:

A look at the Portrayals of Women and the Demographics of the Female Gamer.

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Introduction

The video game industry is a dominating sector in today’s technological economy. Video games line the shelves of stores, provide the basis for numerous magazines and websites and inspire legions of faithful fans. Video game characters appear in major motion pictures and transition into television series. Reuters estimates that the video game industry was worth approximately 65 billion dollars in 2011, which was an increase of 2.3 billion from the previous year. As a market that exhibits no signs of shrinking, it is important to dissect the cultural and social impacts of this media on its consumers and larger society. As the profit margins on the industry increase, so will the power of those at the top of the hierarchy.

Significant study has been given to the gendered nature of video games and the culture they create. Not only are the depictions of males vs. females within video games rousing the interest of researchers, but the gender makeup of the subsequent gaming community is also becoming a realm of study. In this paper I will discuss how the stereotypical and hyper-sexualized representations of women in video games serve to reinforce preexisting female stereotypes and the feminist backlash this has created. Furthermore, I will outline the demographics of the increasing female presence and the potential impacts this could have on the industry. I will also suggest additional areas of research and interest related to video games, culture and gender.

Stereotypes and Social Norms

The representations of women in media and other popular culture outlets play an important role in creating and reinforcing gender roles in society. A role is a set of behaviors assigned to a given status, whether that status is race, age, class, gender or any other category to
which an individual is assigned and judged against (Lindsey, 2011). While these roles can serve as a social behavior guide, there is also a risk that the socially constructed norms can be restrictive or repressive to the effected status (Lindsey, 2011).

Status and role rigidity combine to create stereotypes for different socially constructed groups (Lindsey, 2011). Although stereotypes can be based in part on “truths” about a given group and can serve as a mental shortcut which allows us to make quicker decisions or aid in assessing situations, stereotypes more often than not promote untrue and often derogatory depictions of the groups they represent (Myers, 2008).

It is possible for stereotypes to represent positive or flattering beliefs about a group (Lindsey, 2011). For example, there are common stereotypes which depict Asians as being more intelligent than other racial groups or African Americans as being more athletic. However, even these positive representations can come at a cost. Individuals in a given group who do not fulfill the positive attributes attached to the stereotype of their status may face further discrimination and role confusion (Myers, 2008). Furthermore, by attaching these positive attributes to the status, it removes the function of person achievement (Myers, 2008).

These stereotypes are further perpetuated and reinforced through social institutions such as the media, religion, schools and the government (Myers, 2008). Stereotypes and the accompanying prejudices are used by the controlling power in order to maintain the upper hand socially, economically and intellectually (Myers, 2008). With regards to gendered stereotyping discrimination, radical feminist theory suggests that male domination and the subsequent patriarchy are the driving forces behind misogynist stereotypes and depictions of women in popular culture (Willis).
Marxist feminist theory further details that due to the fact that men have generally been the owners of the means of production for centuries, men have used this economic and cultural dominance to create and enforce the stereotypes of women in order to maintain their powerful position over women (Shelton & Agger, 1993).

**Depictions of Women in Video Games**

We can extract a large amount of knowledge about our culture and the dominant viewpoints through dissecting popular culture. With 87% of 8-17 year olds playing video games to some degree, it is clear that video games have become an incredibly influential medium (Brugess, Stermer & Burgess 2007). Due to this extreme popularity, the examination of the representations of gender within the games warrants attention. I will examine two negative and persisting representations of women in video games – hyper-sexualized bodies and role marginalization.

According to a study conducted by Burgess, Stermer and Burgess in 2007, female video game characters were almost 4 times as likely to be portrayed in a primarily and overtly sexual manner. Females were found to be characterized in a hyper-sexualized manner on the cover of the games as indicated by exaggerated bust size, seductive posing and revealing/tight clothing (Brugess, Stermer & Burgess 2007). Interestingly, it was also found that women were more likely to be animated as extremely busty than their male counterparts were to be animated as overly muscular (Brugess, Stermer & Burgess 2007).

The consequences of these incredibly sexualized images of women on consumers can be dramatic. In a study conducted by Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, it was shown that girls who were exposed to video games with overtly sexual female character had decreased feelings of self-
efficacy (2009). This result did not occur when women were exposed to video games without sexual representations of female characters.

Furthermore, exposure to sexualized female characters resulted in less favorable perceptions of the cognitive abilities of women. This result was present in both women and men who were exposed to sexualized female video game characters (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). Additionally, males presented with sexually explicit images of women were more likely to perceive women as sexual objects and were more likely to make inappropriate sexual advances on later occasions (Yao, Mahood & Linz, 2009).

The perception of women as lacking cognitive skills is a stereotype which has persisted for a significant amount of time (Myers, 2008). In the past, this prejudice has served as the justification to exclude women from schools, government and other social institutions (Myers, 2008).

The other major theme of female characters in video games is marginalization and lack of importance to game play. The majority of women in video games are more likely than male characters to be ancillary characters as opposed to integral parts of the game progression (Brugess, Stermer & Burgess 2007). Even when there was a main female character, they were more likely to share their primary status with a male character, thus downplaying their importance (Brugess, Stermer & Burgess 2007). Even when primary female characters are available, game players of both genders are more likely to select the male character (Shirley & Drake, 2007).

In fact, the vast majority of female video game characters are non-playable characters who exist mainly as part of the virtual environment or as aids to the main, male characters.
(Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). This can be seen in the original Super Mario Brother’s video game for the first Nintendo console. Players can choose to play as Mario or his brother Luigi. The main female character, Princess Peach embodies the damsel-in-distress stereotype as a non-playable character that exists only to be saved by the lead male characters.

Not only are the roles of female characters marginalized, but so are their bodies. While the bodies of both genders were seen fragmented, female bodies were twice as likely to be partitioned in an artificial manner (i.e. just buttocks, breasts or legs) whereas when males bodies were shown in an incomplete manner, it was due to environmental factors such as objects blocking body parts or legs obscured while riding in a vehicle (Brugess, Stermer & Burgess 2007). This indicates a greater objectification of the female body and relegation of the female character to individual body parts.

**Effects of Female Objectification and Stereotyping in Video Games**

We have discussed the manner in which women and their bodies are represented in video games. However, a more crucial piece is how these depictions are affecting the masses. The effected of sexualized female characters on women’s sense of self-efficacy has already been discussed, however the issues goes much deeper. The explicit images of these virtual women have impacts beyond the electronic world. The effect of the sexual exploitation in video games can be felt by real women in daily life.

One particularly worrying effect of the objectification of women in video games relates to violence and the likelihood to sexually harass. The interactive nature of video games may worse the effects of viewing violence and sexually explicit material (Yao, Mahood & Linz, 2009). In a study conducted by Yao, Mahood and Linz, male participants were randomly
assigned to play a sexually explicit role-playing type game, a non-sexual role-playing game or a game with no human characters. After the participants played the games for 25 minutes, they were told to stop and then a series of tests were administered, including a “Likelihood to Sexually Harass” self-report. The results of the test showed that the men who played the sexually explicit role-playing game self-reported a greater tendency to sexually harass than those participants who played the other games (Yao, Mahood & Linz 2009).

Overall, the research paints a rather bleak picture of the effect of hyper-sexualized female video game characters. Not only have studies indicated a negative effect of these representations on women, but the explicit images have also been correlated with a higher tendency for men to sexually harass. With the exceptionally high rate at which video games are being consumed, this could have potentially widespread effects on male-female relations and interactions.

The Demographics of the Female Gamer

Although the video game community has traditionally been dominated by male gamers, there has been a steady increase in the number of women taking part in this community (Dickey 2006). While this change has been gradual, women now makeup an estimated 40% of all game players in the United States are female, and 80% of adolescence girls reported playing video games in their homes (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). There is no evidence that women’s importance in the industry will be diminishing anytime in the foreseeable future.

While is not a large body of work on the nature of female gaming, the statistics that do exist may be surprising to some. The female gamer is generally less aggressive and achievement oriented than her male counterpart, she actually logs more time engaging in game play
(Williams, Consalvo, Caplan & Yee, 2009). Additionally, the female gamer is generally healthier than male gamers and the general population at large (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan & Yee, 2009).

The average female gamer is more likely to be older than the average male gamer (Yee 2008). One suggested explanation for this is that the vast majority of females are introduced to video games through a romantic partner (Yee, 2008). Stable romantic relationships typically occur at a slightly later point in life, thus accounting for the age difference between males and females (Yee, 2008). Males are much less likely to be introduced to video games by a female romantic partner (Yee, 2008). Additionally, women report that they prefer to engage in video games with their partner, while men tend to prefer solitary game play, or playing with other men (Yee 2008).

**Potential Areas of Future Research**

I hypothesize that the preference of females to engage in video game play with a male significant other is a direct result of the representations of women in video games. As the study conducted by Behm-Morawitz and Mastro indicated, women who are exposed to video games with sexualized female characters have lower feelings of self-efficacy (2009), thus women may be attempting to counteract this drop by partnering with their male significant other. However, there is no direct evidence to support this hypothesis, although it could be an area for additional research in the future.

Other areas for future research may also center on female oriented video games. Games designed for women which omit the overt sexual undertones yet still retain the communal attributes of video games may prove to be a new avenue for video game designers. Women are
already engage with the games currently on the market; however there may be a benefit to eliminating some of the content which elicits negative outcomes for women. As more women become involved in the game culture, it is possible that this could prove to be a beneficial and profitable genre.

Conclusions

As video games become an increasingly powerful social institution, their role in creating popular culture must be critically examined. There is already evidence that the pervasive sexual representations of women within the industry have the potential to create negative feelings towards women. Not only that, but the reinforcement of the negative stereotype that women are sexual objects can actually lower the self-esteem and self-efficacy of women themselves. These are important consequences to bear in mind as the genre advances. As a culture do we want to promote these values to future generations?

The rise of the female gamer creates many interesting possibilities within the realm of video game development and community. Women are playing video games in ever increasing numbers and logging in more hours than male players. As this demographic expands and creates more demand, the face of gaming may be permanently altered.
References


