

Gender and Video Games: Nonverbal Messages that Stereotypes Give Men and Women Who Play Video Games

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You know you are a gamer if you spend more time playing video games than sleeping, if you say “this is the last game” and keep playing, if you spend more money on a new game than you do on anything else, or if you would stand out in the cold for hours the opening night of a game. Those who play video games are part of what is known as gamer culture, a culture that is among the fastest growing of populations in America. In this country video games are making profits in the tens of billions of dollars. Gaming is becoming a serious sport with pro gamers and competitions all over the world. Men and women of all ages can enjoy gamer culture, yet, most games are marketed and advertised to male only audiences. As a result, society tends to associate gamer culture with heterosexual males because of nonverbal cues. Stereotypical images of male and female characters, the way characters are placed in gender roles and the available avatars skins, which are human and nonhuman customized characters which can be changed by the gamer, and characters, which cannot be changed and are designed by the game developer, all produce nonverbal cues of gender and how males and females relate to gamer culture.

Commonly, the easiest stereotype to observe in gamer culture is the appearance of video game characters. Most media outlets for gamers including magazines, internet sites, and advertisements, contain many nonverbal messages of what it means to be a man or a woman (Jansz, Van Zoonen, & Vosmeer, 2006). First, take this stereotypical female video game character into consideration; she has long hair, enormous breasts, a trim waist, and is always wearing the skimpiest of outfits (deLaet & Sweedyk 2005). In other words, she is over sexualized, attractive, and has an unattainable body image. Males on the other hand, have washboard abs, huge muscles, and are extraordinarily strong (Downs, & Smith, 2010). One reason why women are extremely sexualized and men are ripped is because men are the ones designing video games. As de Laet and Sweedyk (2005) have found, men are creating these fantasies of not only themselves but women as well which is evident the avatars and characters in video games. For that reason, video game designers are purposefully sending nonverbal messages of what men and women should look like in their depictions of male and female characters in video games. In addition, it shows gamers what traits are desired in men and women. Downs and Smith (2010) have commented that one reason for this is, “overly sexual provocatively dressed, or partially naked male or female characters may be very attractive, attention-getting attributes of video game play” (p. 722). These attractive characters appeal to people in general because it stimulates their minds and pleasures their eyes, which is very pleasing because of the visual nature of video games. The appearance of these characters forces people to identify with the fantasies of the males designers. It also subjects gamers to reexamining their thoughts and ideas of what a person should look like and versus that of the game designers.

Jansz, et al., (2006) studied how people talk about video games in forums and learned that gamers talk about characters that they identify with or see a little bit of themselves in. Thus, gamers relate to these characters just as a person watching a TV show would relate to those

characters. They become a part of the culture like the “Friends” characters are a symbol of American culture. These video game characters are often mistaken as reality. People see these nonverbal messages of appearance and over time can develop eating disorders or abuse steroids (mostly in men) in order to obtain these images (Yao, Mahood, & Linz, 2010). Video games produce stereotypes of atheistically please physical appearances. Which are all nonverbal messages of what men and women exemplify and strive to become. However, it is important to understand these nonverbal messages because they are the images designed by a select few and do not accurately represent the reality of everyday people.

Following this further, another stereotype of gender in video games is how men and women are portrayed in gender roles in the overall story lines of the games. Yao, Mahood, and Linz (2010) have found “over two-thirds of female video game characters—as opposed to only ten percent of male characters) were represented in stereotyped gender roles (e.g., damsel-in-distress and cheerleaders) or the subject of physical objectification” (p. 79). Most women, today, do not identify with these gender roles because they are instead independent, confident women. These stereotypical roles do not appeal to female gamers because they can’t identify or see themselves in these roles in everyday life (Hamlen 2010). This is important to note because gamer culture becomes a part of daily life and interactions based on the nonverbal messages of gender roles. Downs and Smith (2010) have discovered that gender roles and stereotypes of men and women in video games can be transferred over to everyday situations gamers may find themselves in. For instance, people are well aware of gender roles, “game [players] notices that males in video games are active, problem-solving heroes and women are incapable and always needing help from men, sex-based stereotypes may manifest themselves in the home, school, or in other social circles” (Downs, & Smith, 2010, p. 723). Nonverbal messages are being sent that this is reality and this is the norm but in actuality these gender roles a merely one idea of masculinity and femininity created by video game designers and society. Yao et al., (2010) describe this leads to, “Male players of a sexually-explicit video game with themes of sexual-objectification [to] have faster access to thoughts of women as sex objects” (p. 81). This is caused and sent by the nonverbal illustrations of women in video game story lines and characters as highly sexualized objects and in constant need of a man to rescue them. Adding on, males are also put into gender roles where they should protect a woman from a bad guy or objectify her for her good looks. However, women, more often than men, are turned off by these inaccurate depictions and turn away from games that house these stereotypes (Downs, & Smith, 2010, p. 723). Yet, others take these gender roles at face value and in order for things to drastically change, these stereotypes need to be examined and questioned. The nonverbal cues become important in understanding these stereotypes and how people begin to adapt and change to fit these and accept them as their identity based on gender.

Continuing on, one more stereotype in video games is the lack of female avatars and characters to choose from in a game. Avatars and characters represent identity for a gamer because they are selected to represent the player in the game. A recent study by Children Now, found of 874 video game characters studied only twelve percent were female. Downs and Smith (2010) noted that, “Video game players had more opportunities to select playing as a non-human character, such as a robot or anthropomorphized being (e.g. Sonic the Hedgehog)

hog) than a female character” (p. 723). As a result, women are highly underrepresented. Hamlen (2010) suggests that this causes women to have less involvement with gamer culture because they cannot identify with a majority of the characters, thus nonverbal messages are excluding women. This has led to a gender gap in technology where men experience and learn technology from a young age and are able to adapt to new technology. This can be seen in the fact that women do not experience technology at a young age and are less technologically advanced because they are less exposed to it (Hamlen 2010). The Entertainment Software Review Board (ESRB) is in charge of screening video games for content in order to establish ratings. Downs and Smith (2010) said if all E-rated games—meaning that the game is suitable for any audience to play—were screened for provocative attire and unrealistic body images then, “there would be virtually no women in E-rated games” (p. 730). Therefore, women must have stereotypical images and gender roles in order to be represented at all. This is a huge nonverbal message remarking on the way women ought to be. Marks (2009) has commented that finding characters of races other than white is extremely difficult and near impossible for different races of women. He also says that this lack of equal representation of all races and genders will fail to attract customers of these underrepresented groups, especially women. If video game designers continue to send nonverbal messages that exclude people then a whole market of people will not be reached. Nevertheless, a recent movement called “pink games” was developed to reach women but studies have found women enjoy the same games as men (deLaet & Sweedyk, 2005). DeLaet and Sweedyk (2005) say women play these “boys” games because they love gamer culture despite of the negative attitudes towards women. They enjoy playing games and embrace gamer culture, “in spite of the scarcity of female avatars, in spite of hackneyed portrayals of women as objects to be rescued, in spite of the fact that they do not normally fantasize about going to battle in a chain-mail bikini” (deLaet & Sweedyk, 2005 p. 26).

Often people find verbal communication to be the most important mean when sending messages. However, nonverbal messages are just as important, if not more. Gaming culture has recently established itself as a co-culture. This has become evident because of the recent advances in technology. The nonverbal messages in video games are vital because they are different than verbal communication and offer different views. Video games provide many nonverbal messages. The characters in games perpetuate stereotypical images of male and female body images. These images are created by the cultural assumptions that the designers have created. Video game characters appearance provides nonverbal messages of what society thinks men and women should look like. In addition, games portray these same stereotypical gender appearances into gender roles of how men and women ought to be. This results in many female gamers to turn away from games that force women to identify with these roles. Another, nonverbal message is the lack of character and avatar selection in games. Studies have found most people in underrepresented groups turn away from games advertisers lose the market. Since gaming culture is relatively new, because of the need for technology, it is essential to critique how video games give people identity. It is important to see how men and women are portrayed and question if these roles. Gaming gives people identity because it’s a way of life, however, nonverbal cues need to be reevaluated in order to portray all members of gamer culture in an accurate fair way instead of solely being based on

stereotypes. Gaming will continue to grow and change as technology does and hopefully will begin to break apart these nonverbal messages of stereotypical images of men and women.

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