

Not in This Castle!: An Adventure in Gamer Culture's Female Identity

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Abstract

Video games are one of the fastest growing forms of entertainment. Because of their ever-increasing popularity, it is worth noting their effect on society and its behaviors. This study evaluates female game characters by examining their roles in the games compared to those in greater society and how these depictions manifest outside of the screen. Due to the potential for sexism within the games to be reflected outside of gameplay, it is necessary for there to be more positive female game characters and representations that more accurately show an empowered and equal society.

DESCRIPTION

Video games are a fairly new, yet well-established popular form of entertainment, with more than 1 billion gamers worldwide and a \$12.1 billion profit as recently as 2013. The expansion of games onto multiple portable platforms and social networking websites ensures that “more people are playing video games than ever before” (Major Nelson, “Hear Xbox’s Aaron Greenburg”). Given the lucrative appeal of this industry to investors and developers and its entertainment value to consumers, it is safe to say that gaming is significant within our capitalist culture. The shift to make this entertainment type more readily available to consumers reflects society’s fast-paced culture and its desire for constant and instant access. As a well sought out commodity, video games are powerful influences on society’s behaviors. Given their often sexist portrayals and undertones, more should be done to show female characters in important and empowering roles in order to nurture true parity within society.

Since the inception of video games and its subsequent depictions of characters outside of mere shapes (seen in earlier games like *Pong* or *Tetris*), games have displayed a noticeable trend: males dominate. Looking at the most popular video game characters of all time, most are male with very few exceptions (Knowles, “Characters”). Even when female characters are included in video games, the number of choices is limited in comparison to their male counterparts and of the given choices, these characters tend to be overly sexualized, limited in functionality and/or behave in ways that reinforce the idea that women are somehow genetically inferior. Current research shows that video games continue to establish and reinforce gender roles, stereotypes, and inequality outside of their virtual worlds, up to and including benevolent sexism and gender-based violence (Stermer and Burkley; Díez Gutiérrez).

An unfortunate current example of gender-based violence within the gaming community can be seen in the recent Gamergate scandal. Gawker’s Jay Hathaway effectively summarizes Gamergate up as a recent movement that originally started when the female game developer, Zoe Quinn, was set to publish her game, *Depression Quest*, on the famous game-streaming site, *Steam*. Her (now) ex-boyfriend publicly accused her of sleeping with other members of the video game community (i.e. gaming journalists/reviewers) to get good reviews for her game and secure its release. Some members of the gaming community responded with death threats, rape threats, and publishing of personal information. Others came to Quinn’s defense, bringing to light the gender-related tensions within the gaming industry. Despite the fact that it has surfaced that the times of her relationships with these developers and journalists did not coincide with the times of the positive reviews, the Gamergate movement still fluctuates between per-

sonal attacks on Quinn (and other females that came to her defense) and gaming journalism ethics (Hathaway, "What is Gamergate?"). Although one could argue that the hostility of the attacks on Quinn were concerning journalism ethics, it becomes clear that her gender played a part given the nature of the threats. It is not likely that a male would be accused of sleeping his way to being published, nor would members of the community threaten to rape him as a result or to punish him for his questionable actions. Within the gaming community, the lack of support and attacks upon Quinn can be attributed to habitual viewing of the sexist content of video games and constantly seeing women in few and inferior roles, which is also a reflection of female roles in society.

2 EXPLANATION

Gender bias continues to be an issue in our patriarchal society. Despite the progress we've made since the women's suffrage movement, women are still not treated equally. One need not look further than their wallet to see how underrepresented women are (Susan B. Anthony and Sacajewa are the only females on American currency), which is shocking considering that the current global men to women ratio is 1.014:1, with women representing 50.8% of the population in the United States of America ("The World Factbook"; "QuickFacts Beta"). Considering that the population is nearly split between male and female, it is alarming that this is not mirrored within multiple aspects of society.

The occurrence of gender bias in the social world can be attributed to multiple causes. The most recognized cause to consider is the impact of religion (and thus female submissiveness). This historically has been and still is a heavy influence in our culture in many aspects including our thoughts on acceptable behaviors, how we behave, and in shaping our laws. Another possibility for gender bias is noted in *Paying for the Party* in a process called "class reproduction through social closure" (10). In this process, women learn the importance of adhering to gender roles in order to appeal to possible future husbands. By meeting the requirements of "wife material" women can accumulate resources and power through marriage to maintain or improve their social status. In this way, gender roles serve to assign appropriate behavior to females *and* males in order to successfully maneuver through society. These operate to teach women how to behave and men what to expect in female encounters. Because the majority of game developers and gamers are male, female game characters are a creation of these values and reinforce these roles in our culture. Concurrently and from the male perspective, it can also be enticing to feel more valued while immersed in this world through the typical game depictions of heroic males and helpless females, especially considering how population numbers are tipped in women's favor outside of that world.

In this sense, female game characters become what Wendy Griswold defines in *Cultures and Societies of a Changing World* as a cultural object, having "shared significance...given a meaning shared by members of a culture" (21). The female game character in and of itself can mean anything, but because of the shape it has taken inside of video games, it has come to represent "passive roles...submissive characters, victims of violence, or damsels in distress" (Kosut 407). Essentially, the female game character has very little value within a game outside of occasionally helping along a story, relieving anger and/or sexual tension or being rescued. An early example of this is Princess Peach from *Super Mario Bros.* who is constantly being kidnapped by the game series' villain (Bowser) and used as bait for Mario and his brother, Luigi, to rescue, only for Toad to reveal that she is not in the castle. A more current example would be the serial offender, the *Grand Theft Auto* series, with its lack of female roles outside of sexual objects e.g. prostitutes. Not only is the portrayal of women as mere accessories disheartening but this also sends the message that women are either helpless and in need of men to save them

(which is a question of female intellect, strength, and resolve) or implies that females simply exist as vessels of pleasure for their counterpart.

Considering the prevalence of video games in society, it is worth evaluating their role inside our culture and how they affect daily practices and perceptions in society. In Griswold's cultural diamond, she uses the elements of "creators, cultural objects, recipients, and the social world" to show how these things are created, interact, and influence each other in society (16). Its diamond shape connects all four aspects of culture. Applying this concept to gaming: creators = game developers, cultural objects = female (game) characters, recipients = gamers, and the social world = the world within the gaming community (i.e. forums, online play, conferences, etc.) and outside of the gaming community (greater society). Griswold further develops this by implementing the reflection model, stating that "culture is the mirror of social reality...the meaning of a particular cultural object lies in the social structures and social patterns it reflects" (25). Female game characters are created by game developers as reflections of the social world or how women are perceived in our culture. As gamers are exposed to female characters in the game, they are not only exposed to the creator's/game developer's perception of women, but also the social world's perception of females, and then mirror and recreate those perceptions in society to varying degrees.

Being that video games are still relatively new in comparison to other forms of entertainment, research on the connections between video game exposure and gender violence is quite limited in number. The most notable, entitled *SeX-Box: Exposure to Video Games Predicts Benevolent Sexism*, aims to take previous research that examines the effects of sexist video games further by evaluating the resulting attitudes of test subjects based on how often they were exposed to the games. Because video games have been around for a little over 30 years, this study focuses more on regular use rather than just the time used like in previous experimental studies. Stermer and Burkley differentiate between benevolent and hostile sexism because although "both forms of sexism reinforce traditional gender roles" they do so "in different ways." Benevolent sexism operates in the belief of "rigid gender roles and is characterized by protective patronizing attitudes towards women" while hostile sexism involves "feeling[s] of antipathy toward women...fear[ing] that women will leverage feminist ideology to take away men's power" (50). Gender-based violence is defined as "violence perpetrated against women, which is primarily or exclusively motivated by their sex" (Díez Gutiérrez, 58). The two forms of sexism imply that women are not equivalent to men in capabilities and should be treated accordingly, often meaning inferiorly, while the hostile sexism is an actual attack (whether verbal, physical, or suggestive) on females due or related to their gender. Both forms of sexism are harmful in restricting women's freedoms and rights.

The Stermer and Burkley study was conducted with a sample of 175 Midwestern college students utilizing the survey method. Participants were asked about their perceptions of sexist video game content and then asked to rate themselves using a model that significantly predicts aggression, noting that self-evaluations correlate highly with evaluations from experts. Rating their three most-played games and using the average score (from 1 to 7, increasing in sexist content), these scores were compared to how participants rated on previously established models that ascertain hostile and benevolent sexism. The results showed that men were more likely to play games with more perceived sexist content and also showed higher hostile sexism, which is moderately correlated to benevolent sexism (Stermer and Burkley 50-52).

From this study, we can see that the content of video games is indicative of behaviors and attitudes of gamers and are displayed in society. It is worth mentioning that the sample is small and the fact that it is composed of college studies might have a great impact on the findings (as explained above), but the link between sexist video game content with intermittent exposure has been confirmed in prior studies, thus making the likelihood of similar results in any

future and related studies high. However more research would be instrumental in deciphering exactly how these attitudes and behaviors are reinforced and would continue to make a more compelling argument for the expansion of positive female game characters. Although video games and their gender depictions reflect the social world, it also important to realize that their location inside of the cultural diamonds suggests that they have the potential to influence recipients/gamers, which can then act to change the values of the social world.

Considering recent developments in gaming to move more towards gender-inclusiveness, the continuing prevalence of sexism suggests that it is not just about the number of female game characters, but also the part that they play within the games. If the goal is to teach our girls that their lives are somehow less significant or that their only purpose is within the context of their value to men as sexual objects or punching bags, then these values should continue inside cultural objects. If instead we want to show our women and girls that they are equal and valued members of society, deserving of the same accomplishments, rewards, and happiness, then these cultural objects should reflect our culture's changing values. More games portraying realistic female leads would be a great start.

3 EVALUATION

First and foremost, I must say that I consider myself to be a gamer. Multiple sources note that women make up "40% of all gamers" which many find hard to fathom given certain perceptions of gaming (Kosut; "How Much Do You Know About Video Games?"). Many believe that only certain kinds of games constitute gaming and so are reluctant to take on the identity. Anita Sarkeesian (a feminist media critic also of Gamergate fame) gives examples of such games like "*GTA* or *Call of Duty* or *God of War* or other testosterone-infused macho posturing games which often had a sexist, toxic culture that surrounded them." By that description being a gamer may not seem appealing, but considering the countless games I've played across many consoles, genres, and *ahem* decades, I accurately claim the label. Although gender inequality is rampant in video games, it also exists outside of games, merely making it a reflection of social reality, although greatly magnified and condensed. When I focus on the story or gameplay, it is then that I am reminded of the beauty that games are and can be. Sarkeesian also wisely states that "you can love something and be critical of it" (Totilo, "How Anita Sarkeesian Wants Games to Change"). Even though video games are heavily flawed pieces of entertainment, it is their ability to change and affect that brings me back.

Some notable changes have been made in recent years. My thoughts on whether these changes will coalesce into a more positive depiction of women in games in my lifetime ebbs and flows accordingly. Now more than ever, the relationship between gender violence in video games and gender violence in reality is being scrutinized. Once the number of studies that research this subject grows and continue to establish a causal relationship, that evidence can be used to illuminate the necessity for equal treatment within entertainment and result in more proactive measures for positive female representations in video games.

Currently, the number of female lead characters has increased, but still does not reflect the near 50/50 split seen in society nor the differences in body types that real women possess. Some older characters have been redesigned since their initial debut. The most notable redesign is that of Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*, whose polygonal assets were reminiscent of some of Madonna's more enhanced stage costumes of the early 90s. Now her measurements have been reduced to those that would be seen on an actual woman, although she is not always realistically covered considering the conditions encountered on her tomb raids. More female leads that are appropriately clothed for their functionality are on the rise, like Chell from *Por-*

tal, Faith Connors from *Mirrors Edge*, and Alyx Vance from the *Half-Life* series, to name a few (Banned, "Female Gamers").

Another way game developers have tried to be more gender inclusive is evident in game content. Kosut notes "a rise in girl-oriented video games" but some of these titles, such as *Cooking Mama* and *Barbie Fashion Designer* can be seen as another way to reinforce gender roles, albeit in a more positive light (408). These games seem to assume that all females embody a femininity that is evident and enforced in *Paying for the Party*: "a particular style of femininity, defined by extroversion, niceness, and catering to the other" (80). This implies that a woman should enjoy any activity that exhibits a congenial, outgoing, and hospitable personality, the subject matter of these types of games. This could be seen as dictating what a women's role is in society and also discourages deviations. However, if you are a female that does not enjoy fashion or cooking, the broadening of this type of game content does little to appeal to you. Concurrently, if you are a male that does enjoy these hobbies, the portrayal of main characters solely as females may seem as if these games are exclusive of your gender.

Other ways developers have allowed for the possibility of more female characters is by the expansion of the create-a-character mode outside of its original genre, RPGs (role-playing games). While it is appealing to be able to make a character however one sees fit, it also takes the pressure off of developers to make more inclusive games by leaving the choice up to the gamer themselves. As Sarkeesian notes, "media's influence is subtle and helps to shape our attitudes, beliefs and values for better and for worse. Media can inspire greatness and challenge the status quo or sadly, more often, it can demoralize and reinforce systems of power and privilege and oppression" (Totilo). Taking into account the ability of games to influence culture, if game developers continue to pass on this opportunity to bolster a stronger female presence in video games, they miss out on their potential to elicit a greater and more positive change in society.

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