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Gender Games –

The Representation of Women in Video Games

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Introduction

The twentieth century has seen an extreme rise in the development of technology and its incorporation into our homes. As a direct result, technology is beginning to have a greater influence when it comes to our personal perspectives on various issues, ranging from our taste in food to our choice of bath gels.

One such technology that has gone through a paradigm shift is video games. Video Games first became popular in the 1970's with the creation of Pong. Pong is the game credited with starting the subsequent rise in popularity in videogames (PBS, 2007). From the time it was released for consoles in 1975, it was so popular that it spawned a series of copies. By 1978, the videogame industry was born (Miller, 2005). Videogames quickly became a major socialization feature of children's lives a phenomenon which has only increased since (Berry & Mitchell-Kernan, 1982).

With the development of technology, videogames have progressively become more acceptable as a method of entertainment and have transitioned to a popular source of entertainment.

The topic that has been chosen for this research paper is the representation of women in video games. This topic seeks to determine whether there has been a change in the portrayal of women from the first iteration of the games to their most recent editions. In the past, female characters in videogames have consistently been viewed in a number of ways, very rarely one that spelt out confidence or strength. Even in a fictional universe, women were subservient, weak and incapable of acting on their own.

With videogames become a more popular media, the number of female gamers grew and they felt ostracised by the portrayal of women in videogames. This has resulted in a change in the development of videogames; more prominent female characters have appeared - titles have been developed with female characters acting as protagonists or villains. It seems

that everything is moving forward, that the era of the digital damsel in distress is over, but is it really?

This topic is extremely pertinent towards Contemporary Media as in the present day, technology is not getting more diverse, and it is beginning to consolidate itself. Media types are moving towards common platforms, the tablet for the traveller, the smartphone for the jetsetter and the videogame console for the entire family. The television room has been a stagnant feature of the average home; however, with the purchasing of videogames becoming a greater financial possibility, its inclusion into that TV room is a definite. With children being the prime target for videogames, the way that women are shown is most certainly bound to influence them in the way they conduct themselves towards women.

Previous Studies

It was interesting to discover that despite the fascinating nature of this topic, few studies have been conducted on video games and their impact on those who played said games.

The various studies that the studied looked at were not directly linked to the topic being discussed, but rather, provided a substantial base for the research to form a hypothesis and initial research assumptions.

The study ‘Sex, Lies and Video Games’, (Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007), while along the lines of the representation of women in video games, their focus was much narrower; allowing them to have a much more quantitative study with a detailed analysis.

Similarly, ‘Shirts vs. Skins’ (Beasley & Standley, 2002) was a study that looked at the earlier video games that had been developed and analysed the clothing that characters had when compared to their roles. It was very interesting to note their conclusions about the total number of female characters in that era as it furthered this studies situation that in the past, female characters were in a considerable minority.

Lastly, the study identified a research paper that would have affected the analysis portion considerably had it been found in time. ‘The Lara Phenomenon’ (Jansz & Martis, 2007) while focusing on Lara Croft and her impact on gaming, did provide substantial evidence with modern examples which may have helped this study tremendously in its analysis. However, it is important to note that the timeframe for this study is restricted to the more recent games.

Thus, the previous studies assisted tremendously in giving the researcher an adequate format and understanding of how to treat the analysis of the various characters.

Research Methodology

The nature of this study emphasises much more on the use of primary research in order to adequately view the portrayal, gameplay and aesthetics of female characters. Keeping this in mind, the study was conducted by making full use of the Social Media website, YouTube.com.

Presently, most videogames have their gameplay, and their cutscenes posted on YouTube, whether done by fans or game portals, it provides an excellent means for one to experience entire games without ever having to purchase them.

The sole drawback that the researcher experienced in the primary research was that by not playing the game, it was unable to identify if there was an actual programming difference from female characters to male characters.

In preliminary discussions on the possible research methods that this study could use, it was suggested that the use of a survey could be possible, the researcher chose to not conduct a survey as it was determined that the objective of the study would not be fulfilled or enhanced by conducting a survey. The opinionated responses of a sample population would alter the study which attempts to view the games at an equal level.

Aside from the primary research, the study has utilised available studies of a similar nature that have spoken about female representation in video games. This has been done in order to provide a base.

The study involved the following games series: Super Mario Bros, Metroid, Dead or Alive, Tomb Raider, Mass Effect, Portal, and Halo.

Finding and Analysis

The study has divided the findings into four distinct categories, with the end objective of simplifying the analysis.

The Damsel in Distress

A popular image that is seen in various stories from childhood stories is the story of the princess in need of saving. This theme is reflected in the realm of videogames, *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) revolves around Mario's quest to rescue Princess Peach. The character of Princess Peach perfectly fits the criteria of an individual that is in constant need of rescue as it is mentioned in *Super Mario Bros. 2* (Nintendo, 1993) that the Princess is kidnapped on a weekly basis, further diminishing her worth as an individual.

Conducive of this fact, in *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1993) it is noted that while Princess Peach is a playable character, she is significantly weaker than others as she moves slower in activities (running, and picking up items from the ground) that are essential to gameplay (one is required to throw objects at enemies, or failing that, run from them).

Mario games are perpetuated with the consistent concept of a love story between Mario and Princess Peach; however, despite the hero's multitude of rescues, there is very little response from Peach to appreciate Mario's actions, aside from giving him cake (Nintendo, 2007).

It is important to note, that despite the popularity of the Mario game and Princess Peach, the character of Samus Aran created in the video game series, *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986) presents a female character as the protagonist who is never in need of assistance of male counterparts and is capable of defending herself.

Shifting the focus to prominent female characters of modern video game franchises, we are presented with a wide array of responses to the tag of 'damsel in distress'. In *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie Studios, 2001) *Halo 2* (Bungie Studios, 2004), *Halo 3* (Bungie

Studios, 2007) and the recently released Halo 4 (343 Industries, 2012), we see the recreation of the phenomenon of the ‘damsel in distress’ here the character, Cortana, is a self-aware, self-capable artificial intelligence. Despite acting as the players guide and performing off-screen acts that assist the player, in every iteration of the franchise, she is inevitably portrayed as the ‘damsel in distress’. In Halo 2 this role is downplayed as the character makes a notable sacrifice, however it does inevitably create the stage for Halo 3 where the protagonist, the Master Chief, attempts to rescue her twice, despite an imminent galactic threat.

On the flipside, there are games like Portal (Valve Corporation, 2007) and Portal 2 (Valve Corporation, 2011), this series is interesting as it’s antagonist and protagonist are both female. The protagonist, Chell, has awoken to find herself in an abandoned facility run by the sadistic GLaDOS. Imprisoned and essentially fighting for her life, Chell makes the decision to escape and fights GLaDOS to escape. This creates the situation of a damsel in distress not waiting for her saviour, but rather, taking matters into her own hands, a decision which may be viewed as a shift from the concept of the ‘damsel in distress’.

The Sex Objects

Another association that is often made towards female characters in video games is their blatantly obvious sexual nature. This stereotype is extremely strengthened by fighting games like the Dead or Alive series, where female characters are portrayed with large breasts. Tomb Raider’s protagonist, Lara Croft, is also depicted in a very sexual manner, with body hugging clothes which do reveal an ample amount of skin.

In the first iteration of both games, they were limited by the technology available when designing the characters; nevertheless, for Tomb Raider (Core Design, 1996) the developers still ensured that the characters depiction was much more sexual than any games that had been created till then. It is interesting to note that aside from the criticism regarding

the characters sexual portrayal, it was a decision that got the game and the character of Lara Croft worldwide fame, with Croft becoming more popular than the game franchise. However, in the trailers for the newest Tomb Raider (Square Enix, 2013), the character is much more clothed and is portrayed less sexually, however, the study did not overly analyse this game, due to its unreleased status and the fact that Lara Croft is intended to be a survivor in this game, leaving less scope for exploitation.

The Dead or Alive series, which began with the first game in 1997 (Team Ninja, 1997) has a rather continuous portrayal in the way it depicted women in its games. A news article (Salter, 2012) described how the developers wanted to reduce the breast size of characters bringing about negative responses from fans.

What have made fighting game female character so sexually explicit are two concepts: 'Breast Physics' and 'Battle Lingerie'. Breast Physics is a concept that Team Ninja has become notorious for, in every iteration of the Dead or Alive series, they have specified the improved animation of breasts, from their movement in combat, to how the environment interacts with them. The other concept, of Battle Lingerie is much more widespread, having an appearance in other fighting games like Soul Caliber and Tekken. The concept for Battle Lingerie is that as the characters health and armour increases despite the decrease in the amount of clothing that they wear on them. Developers essentially reward players with more health and more sexual characters. This is a concept that has been widely criticized however, developers have realised that the fans of the game buy it with the scantily clad women being one of the games primary Unique Selling Properties (USP).

Another interesting perspective develops when the study includes the Halo series, the character mentioned earlier, Cortana, has gone through 4 models, each model gradually making her more realistic than previously. At first, it was associated with as a result of improved graphics, however with Halo 4; the character has gone through a major change as

far as her aesthetic appearance is concerned. She has been given a much more curved figure, and along with this, she too has been given the ‘breast physics’ treatment.

Masters and Commanders

In the 80’s and 90’s, console videogames were considered a male dominated market, and as a result, the games that were generated were not designed for a female demographic. However, there is an exception to every rule. When Nintendo first released Metroid (1986) the protagonist was encased in heavy armour that made determining its gender impossible. The game was an instant hit and grew much of a fan following. Fans could not believe it in 2001, when the character was finally revealed to be a woman, Samus Aran. For a character like Samus to have become that popular was extremely unprecedented and proved the point that female characters were not all damsels, but serious characters able to operate without male intervention.

In recent years, game developers have recognised that there is an overwhelming female gamer population. As a result, of this and a desire to portray women in potentially equal roles as men, games have seen a significant change. Now there are characters that are much more in control of the situation and in some cases, dictate orders to the protagonist. The character of Cortana from Halo (2001) is one such character who acts as the guide for the protagonist.

Just as Samus originally did, female characters are blazing forth as the masters of their own fate. The character of Chell in Portal is iconic for being a female character who decided her own actions. However, what the study found is that for a character such as Chell, despite being a female character, the convenient fact that she was mute, simply showed that it was a skin that was expected to sell the change in the players mindset. Truly, the sequel, Portal 2, single player involves continuing Chell’s journey, while co-op involves playing as two robots. There is no difference in gameplay or even character vocalisation.

This is an interesting concept that can be drawn back to Samus' character in Metroid. The character was similarly described as being very silent and objective based. This begs the question that is, are female characters simply as skin that developers place upon 3-D models?

The study finds, with a quick comparison to the Halo series male protagonist that even in male dominated First Person Shooter (FPS) games (which Portal, Halo and Metroid are), the protagonist is identified as one which doesn't speak much, in order to allow the player to sink in and feel that they are the character.

However, this effect is limited to FPS games as in games like Tomb Raider and Mass Effect, the character is played from a third person perspective, or an over the shoulder perspective, making appearances and vocalisation much more essential to defining the character.

As a character, Lara Croft has always been the master of her own fate, she's been the protagonist and she's very often had male foes, thus making her one of the stronger female characters as she provides a much stronger contrast towards the enemies of Metroid and Portal. Thus Croft does seem to represent the 'ideal' videogame woman; strong, confident, sexy, single, rich (can't forget that), and above all else, independent.

However, when it comes to characters with true independence, there is no character quite like Mass Effect's Commander Shepard. The game was built with both gender demographics and as a result, players can be either male or female. The game was interesting as it allows the player to carry out any action that they wish to do, including having sexual relations with other women, a concept that had never been explored in any popular game franchise. The overall character of Shepard was one of complete authority, considering the characters role as a protagonist; this is expected and would be expected in many other games of its kind.

Stubborn Stain

The study has found that there is an overwhelming amount of change in the roles of female characters, however, there are still cases where despite a change has occurred, it has been met with critical responses.

With the reveal trailer for the newest Tomb Raider in June 2012, there was a very clear indication that the protagonist was about to be raped, where she overcomes her attacker and kills him. (Schreier, 2012) While the game developers associated this with the characters evolution, it was quick to receive tremendous amounts of criticism for delving into the deep dark waters of rape. Which begs the question, one which is often asked in reality, if we want to have women portrayed correctly, then is it not times to also acknowledge the problems that they might face as beautiful women in dangerous situations?

The equality card is often seen; as the developers of Dead or Alive could easily say that they are completely representing women power by having female characters, albeit, scantily clad female characters beating male characters senseless. It's the perfect way to represent a woman's equality on a fair stage.

However, another thing which comes to light is that even with strong characters like Commander Shepard, there is never a possibility of rape arising, for the characters paths are set for both male and female protagonist; it is only the choices that are available for the player to choose.

Future Readers and Future Studies

The field of video games is a field that is tremendously untouched by conventional studies and media. The youth of today, can see the impression that it can have, which means that the youth of tomorrow will be extremely impacted by the roles and representations that are conveyed through video games.

This means that aside from the academic purpose of this paper, it is imperative that further studies are done to conclusively analyse how women and generic characters are represented in this vast media. For it is sometimes the smallest things, a derogatory line, an inappropriate action might be ignorable at first, that impact viewers the most.

The study is a qualitative study, and thus does not have the factual and statistical data to drive home its points. However, subsequent studies by psychologists, sociologists, media students and students of gender studies may look upon this paper and have a similar though to that which this paper is trying to convey.

This paper, to put it bluntly, has found that while there has been a considerable change to represent women in an equal and fair light, there are still immense factors such as businesses and customer feedback that will always determine the nature of a game. Video games are a business, a massively growing business, and the customers will always decide the businesses next project.

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