Big Breasts and Bad Guys: Depictions of Gender and Race in Video Games

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ABSTRACT. Video games have become a powerful force in the culture. Depictions of women in video games are scarce and highly stereotypical. Women are usually minor characters, are seen as victims rather than heroines, and are depicted in highly sexualized ways. Whereas early games had only a few representations of people of color, people of color were often depicted in derogatory and unflattering ways. Current games continue to employ racial stereotypes by limiting the roles and representations of non-White characters. Gender and racial stereotyping in video games is discussed, and ways to raise awareness of the issues are suggested.

KEYWORDS. Aggression, fantasy, gender stereotypes, media, parents, racial stereotypes, role depiction, sexualization, video games, women

Because many people associate video games with children, the widespread popularity of this medium may be surprising. Video games have evolved and proliferated to become a powerful force in the culture.
In the early years of the medium, video games were little more than grids and boxes of muted color. Details of the games were left largely to the imagination. In the nearly fifty years since the inception of interactive games, contemporary video games consist of graphics and scenes that rival the real world for beauty and depth.

The general public had very little exposure to video game titles until the 1970s. At that point in time, video games seemed to be associated with children who were socially awkward, “nerdy,” or who needed a substitute for real life interaction. Today, a multitude of people across the world routinely play video games to such an extent that they are considered part of everyday culture in a number of societies. About 67% of the heads of households in the United States play video games, with the average age of players being roughly 33 years of age (Electronic Software Association [ESA], 2007). In 2006, the ESA reported a gross income of 7.4 billion dollars; just ten years ago, in 1996, the reported income was 2.6 billion. If this rate of growth continues, video games will soon be a main source of consumerism across the world.

**VIDEO GAMES AND AGGRESSION**

Many parents wonder how violent video games may affect children; they wonder if children and teenagers will become more aggressive if they participate in violent video games. Video games have received negative press about being the cause of violence and even being responsible for the increase in school shootings (Benedetti, 2007). A number of studies have sought to explore the link between aggression and violent video games among children and adolescents (Carnagey & Anderson, 2005; Funk, 2005). Several of the studies apply Bandura’s Social Modeling Theory, which describes how individuals can learn behaviors merely by watching a model commit a behavior and be rewarded for it (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). With video games, the model is the main character. This main character usually takes part in some violent act and almost always gets rewarded with an increased score or advancement of the plot for performing the act. The published research appears to support evidence of a positive correlation between video games and aggression (Bartholow, Sestir, & Davis, 2005).

Still, the research does not necessarily support the hypothesis that violent video games will cause increased levels of aggression. The same data might indicate, rather than that video games cause aggression, that
aggressive individuals may seek out violent representations of media. A recent meta-analytic review of the existing literature (Ferguson, 2007) found evidence of publication bias in journal articles regarding video game violence and aggression. Ferguson demonstrated that several studies with larger effect sizes utilized nonstandardized and less reliable measures of violence and aggression. Although video game violence is an important issue that continues to receive needed attention, other problematic issues have been neglected in the literature.

**GENDER STEREOTYPES**

Relatively unexplored in the research on video games is the depiction of gender and racial stereotypes. This paper hopes to offer information and increase consciousness about the negative portrayals of women and people of color in popular video games of the past as well as in current popular games. Clinicians, educators, and parents need to be familiar with the kinds of gender and race messages communicated through these popular games, messages that are often overlooked by the Entertainment Software Rating Board ([ESRB], 2007).

The ESRB (2007) is responsible for rating games’ appropriateness for children or adolescents. Whereas the entertainment industry as a whole promotes various representations of gender, this is most notable in television and movies. In movies and television, research and activism have underscored the effects that unrealistic and over-sexualized representations of women may have on adolescents and body image (Beasley & Standley, 2002), and awareness of the issues are growing. Awareness of similar issues in video games has yet to enter the public discourse.

Many games feature the common plot of a hero rescuing a princess from the evil hands of a sorcerer or magician. Whereas this theme is quite common in fairy tales and legends, it appears in particularly disturbing ways in the video game world. For example, the hero in a game is traditionally male and often carries a large weapon, usually a sword or gun. The villain of the game is often a human or a monster but is also male in the majority of games. Both the hero and villain are typically large and imposing with prominent musculature, scars, an eye patch, or other defining features of previous violence. The princess or damsel, in contrast, is portrayed as helpless, incapable of violence, and often wearing tightly fitting or otherwise revealing clothing that fails to contain her impossibly proportioned body.
This portrayal of women is sometimes more associated with the marketing of the game than with the game itself. In a full page advertisement (Gamespy, 2003) for a computer game called “Neverwinter Nights” (2002), the heading of the advertisement asks, “Have you seen this girl?” and shows the image of a nearly naked woman, partially covered by seashells. Interestingly, this girl appears in the game but is not presented there as nearly nude.

Another example of using stereotyped gender depictions for advertising occurred recently in an ad for a popular strategy game called “Civilization IV” (2005). The company producing the game recently ran a print advertisement (Civ goes big, 2007) for an add-on feature to the game. The ad features a busty version of the Statue of Liberty and the words “CIV GOES BIG” despite the lack of anything overtly sexual in the playing of the game.

The physical representation of gender in the vast majority of video games is also a close adherent to societal expectations of beauty. Women are most commonly depicted as having very large breasts, tiny waists, and full, pouting lips. Examples of these images are plentiful and include Lara Croft of the popular “Tomb Raider” games (2006). According to one game reviewer (Richardson, 2007), the latest version of a series called “Soul Caliber IV” by Namco is due to be released next year. Richardson noted that female characters’ breast sizes have significantly increased from previous versions, which already depicted them as considerably larger than real women’s. Photos illustrating the full extent of these exaggerated proportions are available on the review website (Richardson, 2007), but due to copyright laws we are unable to print them in this article.

“Dead or Alive” (1998), another combat based game featuring female characters with excessive proportions, went so far as to create a spin-off titled “Dead or Alive Extreme Beach Volleyball” (2003). This version featured those same characters in a volleyball game with a group of men whose eyes are glued to the game, purportedly watching the bodies of the game characters. A commercial for the game featured the commentary, “Play with a friend...or play with yourself” (Gamemaster14XIV, 2006). The end of the commercial featured a play on words that called attention to the “X” in Xbox (the system on which the title was released), suggesting something along the lines of an “X” rating.

RACIAL STEREOTYPES

Offensive and stereotypical racial images in video games are not typically as easy to identify as the aforementioned gender images. However,
many video games depict stereotypical racial images and limit the roles of characters of color. These images were more overt in the earlier days of video games and tend to be more subtle in today’s games.

“Custer’s Revenge,” also known as “Westward Ho,” is a game that was released in 1982 for the Atari 2600 console. The objective of the game was to direct a naked cowboy (Custer) across the screen to a naked Native American woman who was tied up at a stake. To score points, the player needed to dodge arrows and make it towards the woman. Upon reaching the tied up woman, the character would then have intercourse with her. At its release, the game sparked controversy from women’s groups as well as Native American tribes for simulating rape and glorifying the discrimination against Native Americans during the 1800s. Hailed by Gamespy as the #1 Most Shameful Game Ever Made and #3 in PC World’s list of “The 10 Worst Games of All Time,” Custer’s Revenge has gained an immortal standing in video games for its notoriety and shameful plot (Townsend, 2006).

Another early example of negative racial stereotypes can be seen in the “Square’s Tom Sawyer” (1989) game released in Japan. Taking place in the fictional setting of Mark Twain’s renowned novels, the game centered around Tom, Huck, Jim, and others as they navigated the perils of St. Petersburg in search of treasure. Although harmless in plot, the depiction of Jim is that of a blackface caricature. In comparison to the other characters in the game, Jim is by far the most cartoon-like and dehumanized in terms of appearance.

In the same year, a game called “DJ Boy” (1989) was released. This was a side-scrolling, beat-em-up game about a young boy on roller skates who was trying to rescue his girlfriend. A rival gang had taken hostage of the girlfriend. The hero of the game roller skated through the streets in an urban environment while fighting armies of other roller skating villains. One of the villains, “Big Mama,” was a mammy archetype of an overweight, African American woman with deep red lips, a sundress, and a hairnet. Big Mama’s weapons included the ability to throw fireballs out of her bottom as though she were passing gas. In home versions, Big Mama was modified, perhaps to appear somewhat less offensive: Her skin tone was lightened (so that she did not appear to be wearing blackface) and she threw glazed donuts instead of passing fireballs out of her bottom. On the other hand, she also threw shorter characters that appeared to be her children.

Recently, video games have made some progress: More games feature African Americans as the main characters. However, these main
characters are also portrayed in negative, racially stereotypical ways. “Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas” (2004) was in the top 20 most sold games for two years. The game portrayed a young African American man trying to get rich and succeed through violent and criminal gang activity. Games with similar themes include “50 Cent: Bulletproof” (2005), which rap music superstar 50 Cent claimed had educational value due to teaching kids the reality of being in a gang. In “True Crime: New York City” (2005) the main character is a police officer, but the game shows him exacting revenge for offenses committed against him during his life as a gang member prior to becoming a police officer. As a police officer he acts with impunity in achieving “justice.”

The majority of games that feature African Americans as main characters have a limited range of themes: The characters are typically criminals or sports stars (Michael Jordan: Chaos in the Windy City, 1994; Shaq Fu, 1994) or have some sort of voodoo or “undead” quality (i.e., Akuji the Heartless, 1998; Blade, 2000; Shadow Man, 1999; Spawn: Armageddon, 2003). Michael Jackson’s Moonwalker (1990) is one of the few games that do not fit these themes, though they are based on his celebrity as in the sports games.

The majority of video games tend to portray people of other races in stereotypical ways as well. If the main character in a game is Asian, the character will most likely be a ninja or martial arts expert. “Shadow Warrior” (1997) had a main character named Lo Wang who was embarrassingly stereotypical and made crudely insensitive statements regarding the bombing of Hiroshima. A number of different games, classified as side-scrolling fighters, depict Asians in this style of stereotype. Most Asians in games are represented as mini-bosses whom the commonly white protagonist must defeat in order to advance. Games of this type included “Double Dragon” (1988), “Streets of Rage” (1991), “Final Fight” (1991), and many others.

We did not include the more overtly racist games in our analysis because they are expressly designed to offend (e.g., “Border Patrol” [2003], a game in which the goal is to kill as many Mexicans as possible). Although these kinds of games are truly horrible, they are more along the lines of the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nation, or other groups designed to promote racism. One might argue that, whereas groups and games such as those are certainly repulsive, they are also much easier to avoid. The mainstream video games often contain more subtle embedded images that are harder to notice but that communicate ongoing negative bias and, thus, may have a more powerful impact on users.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Because games come in a wide variety of genres, it should come as no surprise that some games carry negative messages in the form of gender and racial stereotypes. Due to the production of hundreds of games per year, concerned parents and educators may find it nearly impossible to keep up-to-date with the content of every game. Because of this, several groups have distributed information about video games in order to inform concerned parties about video game content. Mothers Against Violence in America (MAVIA) had a website known as gamesmart.org, which is no longer available. On this website, concerned parents could critique individual games and be given recommendations about them. The games listed as appropriate for children were fairly consistent with the ESRB (2007) ratings (E for everyone).

Unfortunately, gamesmart.org had limitations. Regardless of whether the game was listed as appropriate for children, gamesmart.org merely listed the title, omitting the console on which the game could be found. It also did not include any information about the type of play. The games listed as inappropriate were accompanied by no details as to why the game was not suitable for children or teens. Closer inspection of the “appropriate” list revealed some titles that may not be agreeable to some parents due to acts of violence, stealing, and other criminal activities. Likewise, games labeled as “inappropriate” may actually be appropriate for children due to the complex nature and learning curve of the game.

The ESRB (2007) has a website that parents can access. On this website you can type the title of the game in question and the website will pull up the game and offer the rating as well as a few words detailing some of the game content. These ratings and brief descriptions can be found on the box of any video game and there is no difference between what is seen on the box and what is seen on the website. No information is given regarding what is involved in game play, nor is there any depth as to what is meant by “violence” or “suggestive themes.” More information about the ESRB’s ratings and content descriptors are available on their website.

The first two authors of this article are creating a website (Dickerman & Christensen, in process). This website, similar to the ESRB website, will go into some detail about games that may or may not be appropriate for children. Rather than simply list the games relating to age-appropriate content, our website will attempt to look at games that contain questionable stereotypical images. Largely unnoticed by the ESRB, negative racial and gender stereotypes are contained within games across all
genres. Our website (http://www.geocities.com/culturevg; available late 2008/early 2009) will include a listing of game titles with each game's ESRB rating, a brief description of the game's plot, specifics of game play, and the questionable stereotypes inherent within them. This website can serve as a source for parents on questionable stereotypes as well as specific ratings and brief description content. Games that may contain positive and appropriate content for children will be included with brief descriptions of the game play and why the games are appropriate.

Video games are a powerful and prolific medium. Video games offer an in-depth experience of a story and draw the viewer into the "other world" by allowing the participant to interact with, and have an effect upon, that world. Whereas critics might express concern over this fact, Jones (2002) argued that video games could have a positive impact in the lives of children. He suggested that good video games can allow children to cultivate their imagination. Children, he wrote, are frustrated by their inability to control most of the aspects of their own lives and, thus, will seek empowerment in their fantasy lives: lives where small people are able to overpower things that scare them. He concluded that fantasy play such as video games will help children achieve self-confidence. Nettles (2002), in his review of Jones' work, wrote "If 'knowledge is power,' then the lack of knowledge equals powerlessness..." (¶ 6). Users of video games, and parents of users, need to be equipped with the power of knowledge in order to make empowering choices for themselves and their children.

REFERENCES


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