

Entering the Boys' Club: An Analysis of Female Representation in Game Industry, Culture, and Design

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Abstract

Numerous studies have examined the role of gender in game design, game play and game experience and conclude that women are often excluded and objectified in character design, appearance and behavior. Game and gender studies scholars encourage further research in these topics. However, in the analysis and critique of these findings, there is little to no emphasis on a plan of implementation or suggestions made concerning a change in the approach of stereotypes used in game and character design, sexism in game culture and inclusion of women in STEM related fields. This paper provides insights into the importance of gender roles and character design and representation in video games in relation to creating inclusive gaming environments for women.

Keywords: gaming, video games, consoles, gender studies, media studies

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1 Problem Question

How can character design and representation in video games be used to create inclusive gaming environments for women?

2 Introduction

Women make up forty-seven percent of all console, PC, and mobile game players (ESA 2012). Although the growing presence of women in gaming culture is encouraging, most top-selling games reinforce gender stereotypes and inequalities embedded in our society (Kafai, et al., 2008, p. 11). Female characters are often hyper-sexualized through body appearance and revealing clothing in games that “overstress young, buxom and beautiful women in their content” (Kafai, et al., 2008, p. 11). In turn, these negative connotations discourage women from playing “hardcore” games, a term used by gamers to describe games that require significant time and dedication towards successful completion, in addition to diminishing their interest in pursuing careers in the male dominated game industry. This can be supported by the #1reasonwhy hash tag trending topic on Twitter in fall of 2012, where women in the gaming industry expressed their distaste of working in the industry and how issues such as harassment prevented some from working towards having higher-level positions within game companies. These implications hold true not only in gaming but also in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math) related fields (Kafai, et al., 2008). American culture is redefining sex roles, making “appropriate sex roles and behaviors ambiguous and elusive” (Tragos 2009, p. 544). It is important for the gaming industry to respond to these changes by considering female audiences during game design, production, and marketing.

3 Methods

Because the visual portrayal of character avatars is a central component of the gaming experience, we decided to create a visualization of character body types in popular console games. Focusing our research pool on hardcore games, we compiled an image that outlines the average body form and appearance of male and female video game characters. We chose twenty-eight characters for each sex, overlapping twenty-eight separate images on top of each other with a twenty-three percent opacity effect in Adobe Photoshop. The result of this “character stack” we have created supports the statistical data presented in Beasley and Standley’s 2002 study, data that revealed female characters were more likely to show skin than their male counterparts. It thereby confirmed our assumption that the design of game characters has not evolved (by continuing to have unrealistic body proportions) since the study was completed over ten years ago. The resulting silhouette created over the images was used as a template to create sketch renderings of the “average” female and male character, which reveal a contrast between the idealized and hyper-sexualized character design of game characters versus a realistic and non-sexualized representation.

We also compared the evolution of character design in *Mortal Kombat* and *Halo*. By choosing a female and male character in each game, we analyzed the trajectory of avatar design starting with the first original design to the latest and most recent avatar design. We noticed that with advances in graphics rendering technology came a desire for anatomical realism, attention to detail, and further body exaggeration. The female characters have become more slender with bigger breasts and wear less clothing while the male characters have become more muscular, aggressive, and powerful in demeanor.

4 Discussion & Analysis

Our literature reviews show that female roles in game storylines are most often of secondary nature (Miller and Summers 2007; Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009; Dill and Thill 2007). Female characters are commonly underdeveloped in personality, or not developed at all. Conversely, male characters often possess complex and developed personalities that reinforce archetypes of strength, strong will, and independence, making them most often the primary and leading characters. These in-game disparities can be viewed as a reflection of women’s perceived traits, roles, and importance in non-gaming environments. Moreover, when combined with hyper-sexualized character designs, underdeveloped character personalities and plot-lines reinforce the notion that women’s roles are inconsequential and closely associated with sex.

In order to create an inclusive experience for women, it is imperative that game companies design and market games with female target audiences in mind. Over the past several decades, there has been little change in the way female characters are dressed (Glaubke, et al. 2001; Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009; Dill and Thill 2007; Williams, et al. 2009). Our analysis of character designs supports the conclusions of the current literature, stressing that female character representations and roles are often overly sexualized and trivialized. Furthermore, character representations have not kept pace over time with evolving social standards related to gender equality, female participation, and inclusion. Video game character designs continue to play into and reinforce negative stereotypes of women. Lastly, we created a template sketch of what “average” male and female characters might look like based upon more common and realistic body proportions. Further research in this area could test the effectiveness of such character designs and proportions on creating inclusive gaming environments for women by utilizing focus groups and gaming prototypes.

5 Conclusion

Character designs and representations are critical components of overall game design and should be considered when attempting to create an inclusive gaming environment for women. Our project built on existing research by identifying and highlighting the portions of female characters that are most often

exposed in popular contemporary video games. A visualization of character body types was created using twenty-eight character images. When compared to their male counterparts, female characters were often hyper-sexualized in appearance, body proportion, and lack of clothing. A template character sketch of what an “average” male and female character might look like was created that contrasts the norm of unrealistic female and male character designs. What the future holds for further research of this project would include the need to test and analyze whether such “average” character designs that we have analyzed would assist promoting an inclusive and welcoming gaming environment for women.

6 References

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