Women’s Portrayal in Video Games

The Objectification, Sexualization, Violence, and Racism towards Women

Megan Hoffman
COMM 402
October 3, 2008
Throughout time, women have been reduced to being seen as objects. As time has progressed, we have seen more and more of this issue in all types of media including video games. The video game industry objectifies women and promotes the sexual abuse of females in its products. In the media world, sex sells and it seems that the video game makers will use this to negatively portray women. The portrayals of women in video games have caused quite a stir in many people and organizations.

One organization that wants to end the objectification, sexualization, violence, and racism against women in video games is the National Organization for Women. According to the American Psychological Association’s 2007 report, the sexualization of women leads to problems in women such as: negative influence on their self image, eating disorders, and low self-esteem (National Organization for Women). There was a study conducted to determine if playing a video game that emphasized the body would increase negative body-image. The study dealt with college-aged females from the Midwestern USA. They had participants complete body image measures, play a video game that displayed thin female characters, and then complete post-game body image measures. The results showed that participants in both studies had lower body esteem after playing the video game. This study suggests that video games have a negative influence on the body-image of players (Barlett).

According to *Sex, Lies, and Video Games: The Portrayal of Male and Female Characters on Video Game Covers*, “Two hundred twenty-five console video game covers obtained from online retail sites were examined for portrayals of men and women. We hypothesized that males would be portrayed more often, but that females would be portrayed in a more hyper-sexualized manner. Male characters were almost four times more frequently portrayed than female characters and were given significantly more game relevant action. However, in spite of their less frequent appearance, female characters were more likely to be portrayed with exaggerated, and often objectified, sexiness. Further, violence and sexiness was paired more frequently for female characters than violence and muscular physiques for the male characters.”

A study conducted by “Children Now” found that only 16% of characters in popular video games were females. When these female characters did appear, they were mostly portrayed as bystanders, more likely to scream, and less likely to be fully clothed
than male characters (United States). Although there has been a rise in female protagonists in video games, their bodies are portrayed unrealistically. They are mainly only objects of the people playing the games. For example, there is the character Lara Croft from the game *Tomb Raider*. This game has been highly criticized for having Lara with an unrealistic bust size and revealing clothes. However, in the hopes of appealing to more female players, the creators of the game have changed her image to reduce her generous bust size. They also did away with some of her revealing outfits (Lara's curves).

When it comes to the sexualization of women in video games, I came across a game called *Dead or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball*. This game seems to be more about eye candy than the sport of volleyball. The game even has a zoom feature so players can examine the girls closely. Players can buy several different swimsuits for the girls and each is skimpier than that last. There are features of the game that also allow a player to take their character to empty beaches or forest clearings. In taking your characters to these places, you can earn short routines of slinking, rolling, wiggling, dancing, running, posing, and pushups for the player’s gratification. The girls are reduced to sexual objects and stripped away from anything human (*Dead or Alive*).

Rape, unfortunately, has even worked its way into video games. Custer’s revenge, a game created in 1982 for the Atari 2600, was a pornographic game. According to GameSpy.com, “In this game, the player took control of a naked General George Custer, who had to navigate a battlefield to have sex with an Indian maiden who was tied to a post. Although Mystique claimed the sex was just a consensual bondage escapade and not rape, Native American groups as well as the National Organization for Women believed the game promoted sexual violence and staged national protests against it.” It’s just sad to think that as bad as sexualization and objectification of women are in video games, that they would stoop so low as to bring rape into it.

Violence has always been an integral and controversial aspect of video games. But why is it necessary to add violence against women? *Grand Theft Auto* is one game that comes to mind when thinking about the violence. According to *Media Report to Women*, “The MediaWise Video Game Report Card calls attention to the growing tendency to depict graphic violence against women in the industry's most popular games.
In this season’s best-selling game, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, players are rewarded for kicking a prostitute to death.” Another game known for encouraging players to attack during the course of the game is *Duke Nukem 3D*. According to Media Watch, Teaching Boys to Kill, "*Duke Nukem 3D* moves the 'shooter' through pornography stores, where Duke can use XXX sex posters for target practice. Duke throws cash at a prostituted woman telling her to 'Shake it, Baby' his gun ever ready. In the game bonus points are awarded for the murder of these mostly prostituted and partially nude women. Duke blows up stained glass windows in an empty church or goes to strip clubs where Japanese women lower their kimonos exposing their breasts. Duke is encouraged to kill defenseless, often bound women.”

According to the *Effects of Exposure to Sex Stereotyped Video Game Characters on Tolerance of Sexual Harassment*, “The violent video game literature has previously not extended to the domain of violence against women. The current investigation tested the effects of exposure to sex-typed video game characters versus images of professional men and women on judgments and attitudes supporting aggression against women. Results showed experimental effects of short-term exposure to stereotypical media content on sexual harassment judgments but not on rape myth acceptance. A significant interaction indicated that men exposed to stereotypical content made judgments that were more tolerant of a real-life instance of sexual harassment compared to controls. Long-term exposure to video game violence was correlated with greater tolerance of sexual harassment and greater rape myth acceptance. This data contributes to our understanding of mass media’s role in socialization that supports violence against women.”

Racism is also a problem that finds its way into video games. Another study conducted by “Children Now” found that no Latina characters appear in the most popular video games, and the few Black women who appeared in games were overwhelmingly portrayed as victims of violence. 86% of Black female video game characters are violently harmed in the games (United States).

After researching this topic, I have come to realize how much worse the issues of female objectification and violence against women are in video games. I am already against these issues in all media types because I don’t like the thought of being seen as an object and I really don’t like the issues of violence against women especially when it’s
unnecessarily brought into a video game. I think games should be fun and not promote violence. Being one that doesn’t play many video games, I never really saw these issues and didn’t know they existed in this media type. I knew that violence was a major problem in many games, but didn’t know it extended to being specifically against women.


<http://www.gamecritics.com/review/doaxvolleyball/main.php>


"United States: in video games, Black women are victims, Latinas don't exist." Off Our

"Women's Role in Popular Video Games: Stripped Down and Killed Off." Media Report
[Library name],[City],[State abbreviation]. 4 Oct. 2008