Critically Exploring the Position of Females in Gaming Culture

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Abstract: Although video games are generally seen as mere entertainment or educational tools, according to Taylor (2006), they are in fact cultural products. Some scholars have used gender as an entry point to affirm this. Based on real-life unequal gender power relations, video games feature a heavy dose of white masculinity, creating a space that excludes women (Pham, 2007). In this context, it is said that (Flanagan & Booth, 2002; Shaw, 2010) the gendering of video games should be focused on, examined, and reflected upon. Therefore, this essay will critically analyse the position of women in gaming culture. It will first show how video games portray female characters in a way that appeals to stereotypes and is sexist. Subsequently, it will analyse the reasons for this phenomenon and make recommendations to improve it.

Keywords: Video Games; Gendered; Stereotypes

Introduction

According to Schott and Horrell (2000, p. 37), female characters in video games tend to conform to real-life stereotypes of women, namely, weakness, helplessness, passivity, and dependence on men. For example, in Super Mario Bros, Princess Peach has been kidnapped 17 times; she is incapable of resisting and breaking free, and can only regain her freedom with the assistance of Mario. The recurring plots of the heroic rescue hint at the lack of autonomy of women: their fate, whether bound or rescued, is in the hands of men (Bryce & Rutter, 2003). In addition, some games reinforce women's vulnerability in more extreme ways, that is, by portraying women as objects of male violence, prisoners, slaves, and submissive to male manipulation (Dill & Thill, 2007). Taking the best-selling game Grand Theft Auto as an example. Ultimately, through violence against women, video games demonstrate and reinforce the relationship of dominance and subordination between men and women (Dill & Thill, 2007).

1. The portrayal of female characters in video games

Furthermore, video games emphasise another stereotype against women, i.e., that the value of women lies in their physical appearance and flesh. In Super Mario Bros, Princess Peach is blonde, tall, shapely. Conversely, Mario is not portrayed in a satisfactory way: he has an exaggeratedly large nose, is short, slightly chubby. The contrasting images, as well as personalities of the two, respond to the widely accepted gender norms in real life: the value of women depends on the outside, while the value of men depends on the inside (Summers & Miller, 2014). At the same time, according to Dill and Thill (2007), the depiction of women as beautiful fantasies attempts to assure male players that even ordinary men can achieve the heroic dream of saving a princess, which satisfies male players' vanity, pride, and desire. It is worth noting that some games do not stop here: they further emphasise female physicality, sexualising women and reducing them to complete objects of the male gaze, fantasy, and conditioning (Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Summers & Miller, 2014, p. 1030; Tompkins et al., 2020). For example, the Fatal Fury 2 and King of Fighters series showcase the voluptuous bodies of young girls; women in The Elder Scrolls are shown in the nude. It is thus evident that these games attach erotic innuendo to the female body and market it as a selling point (Dill & Thill, 2007, p. 853). In addition to displaying female physical features, some games make female characters subservient to men by conveying their desire for sex. For example, in Grand Theft Auto, almost all female characters are explicitly or implicitly implied to have chaotic sexual relationships; they rely on their sexuality to be favoured and chosen by men in order to ultimately gain advantage (Tompkins et al., 2020). In response to such game settings, Tompkins et al.

(2020) pointed out that by misrepresenting women and misrepresenting women's attitudes and perceptions of men and of sex, video games contribute to the de facto domination of men over women, which is defiance and trampling of women's quest for equality, and the justification, confirmation, and consolidation of absolute male power.

2. Causes of misrepresentation of women in video games

Dill and Thill (2007) stated that the portrayal of female characters in video games should be based on recognition and respect. Furthermore, respect requires that video games portray female characters based on reality, presenting diverse female characters, especially positive ones, such as confident, brave, and independent women. However, based on the above examples, it is clear that, at this stage, the portrayal of female characters in video games does not conform to these two principles. Several scholars have reflected on the causes of this phenomenon. According to Bryce and Rutter (2003) and Paaßen (2016), the game technology industry, as well as public gaming spaces, have always been dominated by men, which makes them patriarchal and misogynistic environments. Specifically, in the past, women were excluded from the trajectory of game development due to a perceived lack of ability, and the game technology industry was predominantly engaged by white men, meaning that video games were created and distributed primarily under the domination of men (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). In this context, men bring into the realm of video games gender power relations that have traditionally existed in society, unequally but in their favour, to further entrench male, i.e., their own, dominance by presenting female characters in a one-sided manner and confining them to stereotypes, thus perpetuating the myth of male hegemony on both virtual and practical levels (Dill & Thill, 2007). Besides, due to the highly gendered game setting, video game players are mostly male, resulting in masculinity that permeates public gaming spaces (Bryce & Rutter, 2003). Such environments limit female access and the occurrence of feminine behaviours, causing female players to feel discriminated against and pressured, and to develop psychological constraints and barriers (ibid). To avoid threats and hostility, female players have to hide their femininity in order to participate in the game or withdraw from it (Salter & Blodgett, 2012).

3. Measures to address the misrepresentation of women in video games

According to Kirkpatrick (2012), researchers, as well as the public, should shift their focus from critiquing the lack of female roles and the deformation of female roles in video games to ameliorating the phenomenon, which relies on reconstructing the relationship between gender and technology, especially the relationship between women and technology, to achieve. Tompkins et al. (2020) affirmed this proposal and suggested that women should be encouraged and supported to engage in meaningful practices in order to gain an interest in gaming and related technology fields, and to understand how the cultural structures of gaming and the sub-structures of the gaming community operate, thus laying the groundwork for their wider participation in the gaming industry. Bryce and Rutter (2003) stated that these communities create opportunities for women to develop and improve their gaming skills, to learn and participate in gaming culture experientially, to build confidence in their skills and abilities, to compete with male players on an equal footing, and thereby ultimately to combat the malice directed at women in games.

However, Paaßen and Stratemeyer (2016) indicated that gender equality in games cannot be achieved solely by improving the position of female players. In this context, Tompkins et al. (2020) proposed that women should be given more opportunities to study computer science in order to enter the field of game production and participate in the production of gender-neutral games. Encouragingly, this proposal is gradually becoming a reality: an increasing number of women-founded gaming companies, such as Her Interactive, Girltech, Girl Games, and Purple Moon, have been emerging and growing in recent years. Meanwhile, several non-profit organisations, such as Women in Games WIGI, have been set up around the world to support women in games.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay centred on the place of women in gaming culture. It began by showing how video games portray women, that is, by appealing to real-life stereotypes of women, to create aberrant female characters that are divorced from reality and reinforce the dominant and subordinate relationship between men and women. It then examined the reasons for the emergence of distorted female roles, namely, the male dominance of the gaming technology industry and public gaming spaces, which has largely crowded

out the space for female practitioners and players, leading to the prevalence of patriarchal and misogynistic cultures in gaming. Finally, it proposed measures to improve gender inequalities in games by encouraging and supporting the participation of women practitioners and players in games. As a result, more gender-neutral games will be produced and promoted, and discrimination against women in gaming will decline.

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