

VIDEOGAMES AND THE REPRESENTATION OF MEN AND WOMEN: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, videogames have become a mass phenomenon and have progressively carved out an important space in society and culture. Today, they have growing capabilities to reproduce realistic scenarios, and are increasingly used as an artistic medium with significant narrative potential. In this context, players also need to confront with the representation of aspects of the Self, moving and interacting within video games' parallel worlds. How these aspects are represented in media can be an important influence on a psychological, cultural and social level. Gender representation can be argued to be almost universal in media and reflects real-world beliefs and attitudes. Despite areas of progress, videogames often feature sexist, prejudiced or biased representations of men and women, both from an aesthetical and narrative point of view. This contribution will discuss the role of gender representation in videogames, aiming to summarize the main features and specificities of different portrayals. Specifically, men characters were overrepresented compared to women characters as a lead both in the narrative and in promotional material, although recent improvements were observed. Portrayals of women appeared to feature lean-ideal body idealization, sexualization, objectification, as well as reduced agency. Moreover, portrayals of men appeared to feature muscular-ideal body idealization, restrictive emotionality, and the

overuse of aggressiveness and assertiveness. These restrictive representations can have harmful consequences in the users' reality, such as fostering sexist attitudes and beliefs, promoting restrictive gender roles and ideals of appearance, as well as increasing tolerance of violent behaviors. This analysis suggests that reducing stereotypical and sexist representations, promoting diverse and nuanced representations, and efforts for critical engagement with media portrayals may help reduce these negative effects.

Keywords: videogames; gaming; representations; identity; sexism; sexualization; stereotypes

RESUMEN

Videogames y representación de hombres y mujeres: una perspectiva internacional.

En las últimas décadas, los videojuegos se han convertido en un fenómeno de masas y se han ido haciendo un hueco importante en la sociedad y la cultura. Hoy en día, tienen cada vez más capacidad para reproducir escenarios realistas y se utilizan cada vez más como medio artístico con un importante potencial narrativo. En este contexto, los jugadores también tienen que enfrentarse a la representación de aspectos del Yo, moviéndose e interactuando dentro de los mundos paralelos de los videojuegos. La forma en que estos aspectos se representan en los medios puede ejercer una importante influencia a nivel psicológico, cultural y social. Se puede afirmar que la representación del género es casi universal en los medios de comunicación y refleja las creencias y actitudes del mundo real. A pesar de los avances, los videojuegos presentan a menudo representaciones sexistas, prejuiciosas o sesgadas de hombres y mujeres, tanto desde el punto de vista estético como narrativo. En esta contribución se analizará el papel de la representación de género en los videojuegos, con el objetivo de resumir las principales características y especificidades de las distintas representaciones. En concreto, los personajes masculinos estaban sobrerrepresentados en comparación con los femeninos como protagonistas, tanto en la narrativa como en el material promocional, aunque recientemente se han observado mejoras. Las representaciones de mujeres parecían caracterizarse por la idealización del cuerpo delgado, la sexualización, la cosificación y la reducción de la capacidad de acción. Por otra parte, las representaciones de los hombres parecen presentar una idealización del cuerpo ideal musculoso, una emocionalidad restrictiva y un uso excesivo de la agresividad y la asertividad. Estas representaciones restrictivas pueden tener consecuencias perjudiciales en la realidad de los usuarios, como el fomento de actitudes y creencias sexistas, la promoción de roles de género e ideales de apariencia restrictivos, así como el aumento de la tolerancia de los comportamientos violentos. Este análisis sugiere que la reducción de las representaciones estereotipadas y sexistas, la promoción de representaciones diversas y matizadas, y los esfuerzos por lograr un compromiso crítico con las representaciones mediáticas pueden ayudar a reducir estos efectos negativos.

Palabras clave: videojuegos; juego; representaciones; identidad; sexismo; sexualización; estereotipos

INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, when the human species took its first steps and said its first words, storytelling has proven to be a fundamental adaptive quality, due to its capacity to consolidate relations among group members, to stimulate sympathy and create a sense of belonging and community (Taylor, 1997). One of the most recent storytelling tools is the video game: it is a complex medium, that combines the essential social function of sharing with the equally essential function of playing. The importance of playing has long been recognized as a creative, essential, preparatory activity for proper and healthy brain development, as well as a predictor of high self-esteem and flexibility to adjust one's goals in adulthood (Berti, Bombi, 2013; Greve et al., 2014), which involve a creative use of the mind. By playing, people can dedicate freely to a recreational, pleasant, and aimless activity, which also sometimes allows socialization, creativity, experimentation with roles and learning the importance of rules. Moreover, by simulating events or daily real-life actions, children can acquire patterns of behavior (Alcock, 2007). Therefore, videogames can be configured as testing adult skills, and not solely as leisure objects. When playing videogames, players may use a personal digital replica called avatar, which can be configured to operate as an extension of the player's identity (i.e., an extension of their real identity), or as an alter-ego – a distinct separate

identity of which they temporarily assume control (Chee et al., 2006; Nakamura, 2002). In a well-structured product, projective identity emerges, connecting the players' real identity with his virtual identity, so that the users can identify into this "other-than-self", in which they can project desires, aspirations, feelings (Gee, 2023).

As with other mass media, videogames may affect their audience in several different ways. In general, media exposure may inform perceived norms and aesthetic ideals (Mills et al., 2017), shape people's attitudes and behavioral intentions (Stanford, McCabe, 2002; Huang et al., 2020), and elicit changes in perception and evaluation of one's own appearance (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Hendrickse et al., 2017; Mills, Shannon, Hogue, 2017). Players may be influenced by the physical and psychological characteristics of these avatars (Yee, Bailenson, 2009), as well as the portrayed characters' perceived gender identity, an aspect that is a fundamental component of one's own identity. People may also learn social standards and beliefs via media portrayals of others and are often exposed from a young age to sexist representations (Ward & Grower, 2020) that portray one gender as inferior compared to the other (Abrams et al., 2003). The game's characters' actions and thoughts can influence those of the player, which shapes the acquisition of norms and beliefs (Trinh, 2013). Finally, media representations may influence people's well-being, as highlighted in the scientific literature on sexualization and objectification (American Psychological Association, 2007; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Roberts et al., 2018), that is, representing characters as defined by their sexual appeal, or as sexual objects. Gender representation in videogames appears to commonly feature these characteristics (Gestos et al., 2018), which warrant further examination.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of the present review is to highlight the characteristics and specificities of gender representation in videogames, exploring the relationships between representations, gender stereotypes, sexualization and sexism, as well as exploring the effects these can have on players and the broader social context.

METHODOLOGY

A literature review has been performed using the following search engines and databases: EBSCO (PsycArticles); JSTOR (Journal Storage); PEP (Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing); PUBMED; ScienceDirect; Wiley Online Library. The following keywords were used in different combinations: videogame*; video game*; representation*; gender; media. A database of relevant articles was constructed. Three independent researchers (AM, FS, and LR) conducted thematic analysis on the retrieved articles in order to synthesize results. Any disagreements were discussed until unanimous consent was reached.

RESULTS

Although some conflicting findings emerge, the scientific literature highlights the presence of stereotypical, sexualized, objectifying and biased gender representations. Several studies highlighted the characteristics of these representations. Women as video game protagonists resulted mostly underrepresented (Fisher, 2015; Perry, 2021), and commonly depicted as young, attractive, and slender (Couch et al., 2016). Several content analyses documented the representation of women characters, particularly in top-selling games (Dill & Thill, 2007; Downs & Smith, 2010; Lynch et al., 2016): they are often depicted in sexualized ways, for example through minimal or suggestive clothing (Deighton-Smith, Bell, 2018), while men were less likely to be depicted this way (Carrotte et al., 2017). Both men and women characters often featured unrealistic body proportions and aesthetic standards (Dingelfelter, 2006; Zeely, 2013; Lynch et al., 2016; Leit, Grey, Pope, 2022). Gender-stereotyped and overly sexualized representations are also present in videogames' marketing and promotional materials, such as game trailers, gaming magazines and reviews (Dietz, 1998; Dill & Thill, 2007; Sylvia et al., 2014). From a narrative-personality point of view, women characters are often victim of tropes that relegate them to marginal positions, as characters in need of assistance or playing instrumental or passive roles (Near, 2013; Stermer, Burkley, 2015). Moreover, men characters were adherent to the canons of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005), falling into prototypes that often make great use of violence and oppression to solve problems and get out of situations, and

whose interactions with women are generally marked by conquest and dominance (Trinh, 2013). Their bodies were exaggeratedly muscular and athletic (Dingelfelter, 2006), and were usually portrayed as hypermasculine and physically violent (Burgess et al., 2007). However, some authors report how sexualized women's portrayals in videogames have decreased recently, featuring more realistically proportioned bodies, less revealing clothing, and with more strong and independent personalities (Lynch et al., 2016).

Several other studies highlighted the effects of these representations on the well-being of players. Unrealistically muscular and/or thin body representations may lead to body image dissatisfaction, both in men and women (Dingelfelter, 2006; Blond, 2008; Leit, Grey, Pope, 2022). These characters' sexualized body representations may also increase body dissatisfaction and reduce self-esteem (Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005; Dingelfelter, 2006; Zeely, 2013; Leit, Grey, Pope, 2022). Playing with sexualized avatars may predict body surveillance and appearance-ideal internalization (Vandenbosch et al., 2017).

A number of studies reported potentially negative social consequences as well. Sexualized representations may increase rape myths acceptance in both men and women (Ryan, 2011; Beck et al., 2012). In men, exposure to static images of gender-stereotyped videogame characters was associated to a greater reported tolerance for sexual harassment (Dill et al., 2008) and higher levels of rape myth acceptance and victim blaming (Munsch & Willer, 2012; Burkley et al., 2016). Furthermore, exposure to sexualized avatars was associated with an increase in self-objectification (Fox et al., 2015; Romero-Sanchez et al., 2015; Vance et al., 2015). Negative outcomes can be reflected on players: those who used sexualized avatars reported more experiences with sexual harassment, name-calling, obscene comments (Behm-Morawitz & Schipper, 2015). Objectification of women was associated with a higher chance of negative beliefs about women's abilities (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009) and inappropriate behavior toward women in social contexts (Yao, Mahood & Linz, 2010; Gabbiadini et al., 2016). Sexist depictions may reinforce the idea that masculinity is connected to dominance, power and violence, especially towards women – fostering hostile and benevolent sexism (Ryan, 2011; Burkley, Wong & Bell, 2016), specifically through immersion and presence, which can lead to increases in aggression and hostile sexism (Nowak et al., 2008; LaCroix et al., 2018). Finally, videogames with sexist representations may reinforce the idea that masculinity is connected with imposing power and dominance over others, especially women (Levant & Richmond, 2007), reinforcing gender stereotypes (Yao, Mahood & Linz, 2010) and the idea that the male gender is (or should be) sexually and socially “dominant” in society, and the female gender should instead be “submissive” (Gerdes & Levant, 2017; Cole et al., 2019); for men, exposition to sexist representations was associated to a long-term higher belief in benevolent sexist stereotypes, such as believing women to be weak, pure, and in constant need of protection (Stermer & Burkley, 2015). Male players endorsing sexist attitudes were also more likely to show a strong identification with a male lead character in a violent and sexist game (Yao, Mahood & Linz, 2010; Gabbiadini et al., 2016). Despite these numerous results, some recent studies failed to confirm previous findings between exposition to sexualization and self-objectification (Skowronski, 2021) or between avatar sexualization, hostile sexism and self-objectification (Read et al., 2018). Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis (Ferguson et al., 2022) could not confirm links between exposition to sexualized content and well-being, sexism or misogyny.

DISCUSSION

The portrayal of gender in videogames still features problematic representations: as found in other media, the presence of sexism, stereotypes, and sexualization is persistent and several studies document links to potential physical, psychological and social harms.

Sexist representations in videogames may reinforce the idea that masculinity is connected with imposing power and dominance over others, especially women; therefore, women players may experience highly penalizing consequences connected to sexism and prejudice. Attitudes and gender stereotypes that assume rigid gender roles may also extend beyond the game itself, and women engaged in this activity may often be perceived as outsiders, ostracized and penalized in various ways. Videogames may, to some extent, still be perceived as a men-only world by some players: women players are often verbally abused during game session in a way that forces several

women users to pretend to be of the opposite gender (Fox, Tang, 2016; Paaßen, Morgenroth, Stratemeyer, 2017; Tang et al., 2019; Perry, 2021). Furthermore, the connections between sexualized and objectifying representations, lean/muscular-ideal internalization, body surveillance and body dissatisfaction highlight risks for mental health, as these have been associated to depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, feelings of shame, and disordered eating behaviors (Lowery et al., 2005; Levinson & Rodebaugh, 2015; Grabe, Hyde & Ward, 2008; Martins et al., 2009; Brechan & Kvaem, 2015; Levinson & Rodebaugh, 2015). An overall abuse of the medium can in turn lead to feelings of depression, anxiety and social withdrawal, especially in individuals already at risk (Bozoglan et al., 2013; Geisel et al., 2015; Sarda et al., 2016).

These findings are consistent with a long history of media studies detailing effects of stereotypes, sexism, objectification and sexualization (Ward, 2016; Roberts et al., 2018; Ward & Grower, 2020). However, universal consensus is not present on some aspects (Read et al., 2018; Skowronski, 2021; Ferguson et al., 2022). Some authors have critiqued existing literature, citing methodological concerns, limited short-term effects, or interpreting results differently – hypothesizing that people may choose sexist contents because they agree with those contents, instead of being caused to become more sexist by exposition to these contents (Ferguson et al., 2022). Other authors also hypothesize that effects of sexualized avatars and sexist gameplay may only be present when players are interacting with other characters (Read et al., 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

Despite recent improvements, representations of men and women in videogames still feature some problematic characteristics with potential connections for the wellbeing of players. Given the importance of self-representation within the community, the influences of mass media, and the consequences these may have in individuals' real life, it would be beneficial to further investigate the topic.

DISCLAIMER

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