

Still a Man's Game: Gender Representation in Online Reviews of Video Games

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Despite the rising popularity of video games, the majority of the medium's audience continues to be male. One reason may be that character representations in video games are geared toward male players. This content analysis used video game reviews from a heavily trafficked Internet site to investigate the prevalence and portrayal of male and female video game characters. Consistent with the findings of previous studies, female characters were found to be underrepresented and proportionally more often sexualized in comparison to their male counterparts. In addition to these findings, the study's innovative method—the use of online video game reviews as an indirect measure of video game content—shows promise as a tool for future content analyses of video games.

According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), fully half of all Americans age 6 or older play video games (ESA, 2005). Despite their popularity, however, a demographic rift continues to characterize the video game audience, with more men playing video games than women. Although the ESA boasts that women make up 39% of video game players (ESA, 2005), sizable gender differences have been found in studies of children's video game play habits (e.g., Braun & Giroux, 1989; Buchman & Funk, 1996; Funk, 1993; Griffiths, 1991, 1997) and their attitudes toward the social acceptability of video game play (Funk & Buchman, 1996a).

Differences between the entertainment preferences of males and females likely play a role in such discrepancies, but the games' content might also share

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responsibility. Researchers have noted for years that most video games target a male audience (e.g., Cassel & Jenkins, 1998; Provenzo, 1991), and analyses of video game content have found female video game character portrayals to be infrequent and sexually objectified (e.g., Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Heintz-Knowles & Henderson, 2002). This content may appeal to some males, but seems poorly suited for female video game players and may account for findings such as Funk and Buchman's (1996b) report of a negative relationship between video game play and self-perception questionnaire scores among adolescent girls.

One obstacle to measurement of gender representation in video games is the fact that video game content is radically different from that of most other entertainment media. Content analyses of media such as books, television, and film examine a uniform and linear media package, which makes measurement relatively straightforward. The precise content experienced by a video game player, however, depends on the experience, skill, and time commitment of the player, among other factors. It is therefore difficult to apply systematic and reliable content analysis to such an inconsistent narrative, and application of traditional content analysis strategies appropriate for older media may often be inappropriate for video games.

Considering the problems inherent in systematic content analysis of video games, research should consider other authoritative sources of information about video games. This quantitative content analysis used an Internet gaming site's video game reviews to indirectly measure video game character representation. Aside from contributing to the literature on gender representation in video games, this study aimed to investigate the potential of Internet video game reviews as a source of systematically and reliably measurable information about video game content.

FEMALE CHARACTERS IN VIDEO GAMES

Though much social scientific research and popular debate has focused on the effects of violent video game content (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Copeland, 2004; Scott, 1995; Sherry, 2001), gender representation in games has received some attention. Content analyses have consistently found that video games include far more male characters than female characters (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Heintz-Knowles & Henderson, 2002; Smith, Lachlan, & Tamborini, 2003). When female characters are included in games, it is frequently as nonessential, passive characters (Dietz, 1998; Haninger & Thompson, 2004), and female characters are often depicted wearing revealing and provocative clothing (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Heintz-

Knowles & Henderson, 2002; Thompson & Haninger, 2001) and indulging in sexually suggestive behavior (Haninger & Thompson, 2004).

The implications of the rarity and negative nature of female portrayals in video games are troubling. Cultivation theory (see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) and social expectancy theory (Jussim, 1990) propose that long-term media consumption can skew media consumers' views of the world toward that represented in aggregate by the media content. These perspectives suggest that a video game landscape where women are represented infrequently and as passive, sexualized beings can precipitate a similar *Weltanschauung* among video game players who consume the message through long and frequent bouts of game play.

ONLINE REVIEWS OF VIDEO GAMES

At present, no clearly articulated and accepted methodology exists to guide content analysis of such a variant and interactive media offering as video games. McMillan (2000) described some difficulties researchers confront in conducting content analyses of the Web due to the malleability and interactivity of its content. These issues are even more prevalent in video game content, and they have yet to be addressed in existing analyses of the medium. Because the actions of a video game player affect characters, behaviors, scenarios, and any number of content features, reliable content analysis of such a responsive medium is difficult. Video game content is also highly contingent on a player's skill and the length of time a game is played, so the validity of analyses conducted for short play periods by researchers who may be less familiar with video game conventions and products than the games' typical audience is also suspect.

Existing studies, though informative in their findings, exhibit problems and inconsistencies regarding reliability, amount of content coded, and the skill of players employed. Dietz (1998) reported that coders played the sampled video games but provides no information about the players' skill, how long the games were played, or any intercoder reliability measure used. The coders' experience with video games in Heintz-Knowles and Henderson's (2002) study was not mentioned, and only an intercoder agreement of "at least 94%" (p. 10) was reported as a reliability measure. Heintz-Knowles and Henderson's coders played each game in their sample through only the first level, and Beasley and Collins Standley (2002) analyzed only 20 minutes of play for each game because "playing the complete game would require more skill than coders had at video game playing" (pp. 283–284).

Other content analyses of video games (Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Smith, Lachlan, & Tamborini, 2003; Thompson & Haninger, 2001) have used videotape

to precisely capture content of games played, but time periods analyzed have been as short as 10 minutes—a sampling frame that is in some ways akin to watching only the first 10 minutes of a film to analyze its characters and plot. Thompson and Haninger (2001), whose 90 minutes of play for each video game is the longest period analyzed by any of the content analyses reviewed here, noted that “not playing these games to their conclusion means that some content is missed” (pp. 592–593).

A possible remedy to some problems facing direct analysis of video game content lies in the proliferation of commercial video game review sites on the Internet. Reviews on some sites are authored by professional full-time staffers who are experienced and knowledgeable video game players. Additionally, video game reviews present a manifest, uniform (albeit subjective) text representation of a video game’s overall content from an authoritative source that lends itself to coding more easily than fleeting and flexible video game content. Though game reviews might not be useful for measurement of some specific game events, they have appeal as a comprehensive resource regarding features such as a game’s plot and characters. Existing studies’ use of video game manuals as an information source (Dietz, 1998; Heintz-Knowles & Henderson, 2002), as well as admissions that sampling short time periods is problematic (Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Thompson & Haninger, 2001), suggest that written game reviews have utility as an additional resource.

This somewhat circumventive approach to content analysis has precedent. For example, researchers interested in films have analyzed film trailers (e.g., Oliver & Kalyanaraman, 2002) and rental box covers (Oliver, Banjo, & Kim, 2003) for relevant insight. The same indirect approach has also been applied to video games. Provenzo (1992) examined 47 video game box covers to compare gender portrayals, finding that male characters were represented over 12 times as often as female characters and that only male characters struck a dominant pose in cover art. Scharrer (2004) analyzed 1,054 video game advertisements in three monthly video game magazines, reporting that male characters appeared more than three times as often as female characters in the advertisements and that female characters tended to be significantly more attractive and sexy, more often scantily clad, and less muscular than male characters. Considering the value of these studies, which are consistent with game content analyses’ reports of infrequent, passive, and disproportionately sexualized female character portrayals, a similarly creative effort to examine video game content via video game reviews seems more than justified.

An additional benefit of analyzing review sites is that the attitudes of the reviewers themselves toward gender representations can be examined. Video game reviewers are video game players, and if they are not typical, then perhaps their role as opinion leaders is all the more valuable. Reviews can serve to show not only what trends exist in character representation but also how the game’s reviewers regard these representations in their advice to potential players.

