Beauty in the Background: A Content Analysis of Females in Interactive Digital Games

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ABSTRACT
This content analysis examined the representation of females in top selling console video games. Based on prior content analyses, the study hypothesized that female characters would be more likely to appear in supporting roles and would be represented as suggestively dressed with sexualized portions of their bodies exposed. It was predicted that female characters would be less likely to engage in violence relative to male characters. The results of the analysis of 538 characters from 48 interactive video game systems supported these predictions and suggest that video games portray stereotypic depictions of women consistent with traditional gender roles. The implications of these findings are presented in the context of social learning theory. Furthermore, the unique features of video game play that may heighten their socializing impact are discussed.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Social Learning Theory, Stereotypes, Video Games

INTRODUCTION
The video game industry is relatively new; yet in the span of a few decades, it now rivals the almost century-old film industry in both popularity and revenue (Hewitt, 2005). As a result of this increasing popularity, researchers have become interested in the influence of interactive video games on player’s later attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Anderson & Dill, 2000; Beasley & Standley, 2002; Lachlan, Smith, & Tamborini, 2005; Thompson & Hanigar, 2001). A primary focus of video game research has been the relationship between video game violence and players’ aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (American Psychological Association, 2005; Anderson & Dill, 2000). Other topics, for instance the influence of video game play on player’s self-concept, or the effect video games have on perpetuating negative stereotypes, have received less attention in the scholarly literature.

While video games are unlikely to be the only source or even the primary source of information about gender roles, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that video games allow players to actively engage and take part in scenarios. Furthermore, common stereotypical
depictions in video games are not often countered with other messages. Even more so, the same stereotypic messages are often presented in other forms of media as well. It may be reasonable to assume that if the messages individuals see about gender roles are consistently uniform and come from a variety of sources, they are more likely to be internalized. For instance, research has repeatedly found that media can influence gender role conceptions (Ashton, 1978; Geis, Brown, Waslstedt, & Porter, 1984; Gunter, 2002; Perse, 2000; Schau & Scott, 1984; Williams, Larose, & Frost, 1981).

Unlike other media, digital video games require individuals to take an active role-playing position. That is, the character on the screen represents the player, and the player controls the avatar’s actions and decision-making processes within the game (see Vorderer & Bryant, 2006). Thus, there is an interactive nature to video games that is not present in other forms of media. This paper presents an investigation of the portrayals of females in top selling console video games, focusing on the extent to which their appearance and purpose in the game continue to promulgate stereotypical portrayals of women.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

It is well documented that the media influences the socialization process by providing models for individuals to emulate (American Psychological Association, 2005; Anderson, 2003; Bandura, 1973; Bandura, 1986; Berger, 2005; Murray, 1980; Stein & Frederic, 1975). With the predominance of media in most people’s lives, it is important to examine the content of the messages the media are presenting to viewers. According to social learning theory, individuals will assimilate to their culture partially based on observations of the events and behaviors around them (Bandura, 1986). Learning can occur by observing others’ (i.e., models) behaviors, cognitions, and beliefs and observing the consequences of these actions, thoughts, and beliefs. Modeled actions that are rewarded are more likely to be repeated by the observer, while behaviors that are punished are not. Relevant to digital video games, exposure to virtual models can also influence subsequent behavior (Bandura, 1965; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963; Meltzoff, 1988). Individuals who play video games are particularly likely to model the behavior of characters in the game that they identify with and observe being rewarded for their actions. Thus, the role of socialization in video games is both a pertinent issue and a potential concern given the literature reviewed in this manuscript.

Observer-model identification. Identification with a model increases attention to the model and subsequently the imitation of the modeled actions. Furthermore, past research shows that similarity to the model on a variety of traits (i.e., demographic characteristics) increases identification (Lachlan, Smith, & Tamborini, 2005; Schunk, 2004). Relevant to the current content analysis, other studies reveal that similarity in gender shows an increase in identification and modeling (Bandura, Ross, & Ross 1961, 1963; Madsen, 1968; Schunk, 2004).

Effect of rewards on imitation. When a model’s behavior is rewarded, individuals are more likely to attend to the behavior and subsequently imitate models’ behaviors (Bandura, 1965; Schunk, 2004). Relevant to the current content analysis, rewards within video games have been shown to increase imitation of characters’ actions. For example, rewarding video game violence increased hostile emotion, aggressive thinking, and aggressive behaviors (Carnagey & Anderson, 2005). Moreover, diabetic children who played a video game that rewarded good diabetes maintenance drastically increased their diabetes related maintenance behaviors and subsequently reduced hospital visits (Lieberman, 2001). Both of these individual studies suggest that behavior that is rewarded in a video game may subsequently translate into player actions and thoughts.
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