Sorry, Mario, but Our Better Representations of Women are in Another Video Game: A Qualitative Study on Women's Perspective of Women Video Game Characters

by

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Abstract

The representations of women characters in video games have always been scrutinized for their stereotyped and sexualized appearance by scholars and gamers. Yet these arguments have not focused enough on the players that these representations effect the most, women players. It has been concluded that mostly men work in the video game industry due to the "cycle" of men creating male biased games that appeal to other men more so than women, creating in turn a larger masculine gaming culture which leads to more men wanting to work in the gaming industry and a lack of women in the field (Engelberg, 2019). This situation causes a hegemony of play where men recreate their stereotypical opinions of women in their productions via women characters. This study focuses on the perspectives of women players concerning these misrepresentations. The focus groups gave the participants an opportunity to voice their opinions pertaining to women character representations. This study found that many women are unhappy with the past and present representations but are optimistic about future representations becoming better.

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Introduction

More women are playing video games than men with 59% game players being women in the US (Clement, 2021). Additionally, in the past the Entertainment Software Association's 2018 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data reported the number of adult women who play video games has grown to 33% surpassing the 17% of game players that are male boys under 18 years old. It seems to be that not only is the number of Americans playing video games rising, but so is the average gamer age, with 70% representing gamers over the age of 18. Despite the growing statistics of older women playing video games, there is still a significant lack of variety in women representations in game play (Reinhard, 2009; Dill, & Thill 2007; Downs, & Smith 2010). The representations women do have in games have often been found to be presented as sex objects (i.e., hypersexualized with revealing clothing and disproportionate breast to waist sizes), as well as victims for the male characters to form relationships with and/or rescue portraying women in idealized misrepresentations (Gestos et al., 2018). The representations of women in video games have been debated for years among scholars, critics, developers, and gamers regarding whether the misrepresentations are emotionally and/or psychologically damaging for players (Cunningham, 2018; Martey, 2014; Cassell, & Jenkins 1998). Another developing concern touches on the topic of player immersion in video games. With fast developing new technologies, video games are becoming better and, therefore, more immersive for the players, granting players smoother access in identifying with the game characters (Michailidis et al., 2018; Wilcox-Netepczuk, 2013). In addition to the growing trend of player immersion, comes the dangers of negative effects of video games, such as the

exposure of violent acts (Lull & Bushman, 2016; Tear & Nielsen, 2013; Kontour, 2009) and the hyper- sexualization of women characters (Gestos et al., 2018).

Due to the shift in gender demographics among video game players, (i.e., more women than men) occurring only recently, the majority of research conducted on the dangerous effects of video games previously focused on men players (Jansz, 2005; Ortiz, 2019; Krcmar et al. 2015). Fortunately, there is now a growing concern over misrepresentations of women characters and plenty of research conducted about how these misrepresentations affect both female and male players (LaCroix, 2018; Bell, 2017; Near, 2013). However, most of the research relied on a quantitative method of questionnaires (Ferguson & Colwell, 2020; Linder & Trible, 2020; Burnay et al., 2019; Read et al.,2018), giving the participants no ability to explain their answers in depth. A qualitative approach is needed to understand the human relationship between the women players and their representation in video games, by allowing them to explain their personal experiences and realities. According to Brennen (2017), qualitative research often allows "alternative notions of knowledge" (p.4) that acknowledges that one's "reality is socially constructed," (p. 4). Therefore, this study is an attempt to fill in the gap and to add to the scant research that has been conducted in a qualitative manner. Examining the opinions of women gamers about representation and video game culture allowed them to explain their answers and have an outlet to voice their concerns. Feminist theory was used as lens to focus on how women are represented in video games and how these representations affect women players. This study will employ a qualitative approach, focus groups, to allow observation of the participants in a comfortable setting. A thematic analysis was performed on the data to interpret the shared viewpoints of participants.

Feminist Theory

Many theorists have had difficulty in defining the difference between feminist studies and gender studies due to their similarities (Zalewski, 2010). However, Sandford (2015) explains gender studies focuses more on the social concepts of gender identity, and Reinelt (2003) explains that "feminism is a political commitment to three things: to women's issues, to a way of life, to an intellectual critique," (para. 4). Further, Cuklanz (2016) states that "sophisticated feminist communication theory," should study the interplay of gender and power, as well as race, sexuality, and class while also having the goal of contributing larger focus of social justice (para. 1). Therefore, this study uses feminist theory because the purpose is to give women game players the ability to voice their concerns over unjust portrayals of women in video games.

Feminist theory is often intersectional, and its research is an important theoretical contribution (McCall, 2005). Intersectionality within feminist theory is a concept that clarifies the multiplicity of social categories and can been seen as a framework that recognizes the complex ways that inequalities are combined (Jorba & Rodó-Zárate, 2019). Collins and Bilge (2020) present a working definition that gives more depth to the complexity of intersectionality:

> Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytical tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others- as interrelated and mutually shaping one another.

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in

people, and in human experiences, (p.2).

This broad definition can be applied in a "variety of uses," (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p.2), thus, it is

not surprising to find feminist theory intersecting with media studies due to the multiplicity of

representations of women found in media (Gouma & Dorer, 2019). There are various feminist

theoretical perspectives that have developed about the role of media and women in society

(Batti, 2019; Joseph & Winfield, 2019; Nölke, 2018). The image of women's bodies in media can

be understood as a reflection of how society values women (Carilli & Campbell, 2012). Likewise,

media images not only give critiques of women, but also reinforce society's concept of female

attractiveness (Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Oyesomi & Salawu, 2018; Brown & Knight, 2015;

Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Smith, 1985). Media imagery can worsen these stigmas by reinforcing

sexist stereotypes to an audience (Mitchell & McKinnon, 2019; Vezich et al., 2017; Chetty, 2004;

Rajagopal & Gales, 2002).

However, for this study, the focus was on a specified area feminist theory applied to

media effects: how images of women in video games affect their women players. A common

concern of the visual effects of video games, is the images of violence and how it may affect its

players. According to Gray and Leonard (2018), another growing concern of violent imagery in

video games are the implications of violence toward people of color, women, homosexuals and

transgender people which systematize sexism and racism in their audiences. Thus, the

importance of addressing misrepresentations of women in video games is necessary to address

the stigmas and oppression that affect women in other contexts.

Video Game Identification

Cohen (2006), defined identification with media characters when the player has an "affinity with the character that is so strong that we become absorbed in the text and come to an empathic understanding for the feelings the character experiences, and for his or her motives and goals," (as cited in Lim et al., 2020). Similar, Polito and Hitchens (2020), found that the connection between viewers and media are determined by the viewer's self-representation that allows them to interact differently to various forms of media. This implies that video games, as an interactive form of media, can allow for players to identify with a game character easier than a non-interactive form of media.

Gamers, or people who play video games, like to play games as a form of entertainment. Their goal is to be immersed in a fictional and digital world in video games, so that they may find a relaxing pause from their own lives, much the same way as when one reads a book (Green, Brock, & Kaufman 2004). Game developers want to encourage this immersion by often including narrative elements to their games to assign certain roles to their players (Klimmt, 2003). When gamers play a game, they act on the choices offered to them that shape the course of the game. This action implies that the players are not just observers of this virtual environment, but instead actively participate in the story telling (Vorderer, 2000). As explored in an anthology of game studies articles, *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality*, representation and identity are equally complex systems that rely and react with one another between games and their players. For example, Shaw (2014) found this complicated relationship between identification and representation when her game playing participants voiced their wishes to identify as characters who are sometimes similar to themselves or

sometimes as something more than themselves, conclusively wanting various representations of self to give them freedom in their imaginations.

Video game identification is empirically examined by Klimt et al. (2009) where they created a new construction of identification in video games that is established on self-perception and self-concept models found in social psychology. They found that their "account of video game identification seems to be exchangeable with the notion of roleplay as active identity simulation, primarily because game interactivity leaves degrees of freedom to the player in terms of how she is acting out the character or role assigned to her," (p. 361).

The claim that video game identification has both negative and positive effects for video game players indicates the importance of analyzing this form of self-perception further, especially in women players as they are likely to be misrepresented in the games they play (Miele, 2020). Women players are predicted to be more prone to video game identification, as Lombard et al. (2000) discovered when they tested this presumption to measure gender perception responses to mere screen size change. The concept of women game players being more susceptible to video game identification leads one to believe that they are at more risk to receive negative side effects from character immersion, especially if it is a negative character representation. This literature leads to the first research question:

RQ1: How do women game players self-identify with a majority of video game women characters?

Since video game identification is in fact a form of self-perception, it can be said that the ability of the player to relate to the character may be broken by a lack of shared traits. One example of a lacking shared trait is that of gender, as women are underrepresented as

characters in video games (Paaβen et al., 2016; Behm-Morawitz, & Mastro, 2009; Ogletree and

Drake, 2007). An early content analysis conducted in the 1980s, at the beginning of the at-home

video game playing movement, showed that a startling small number of women characters

appeared (Braun & Giroux, 1989) and despite video game productions increasing through the

1990s, women characters were still found vastly less than male characters (Dietz, 1998). In

2010, Downs & Smith found there were considerably more male primary characters, meaning

they had their own story outside of other characters, at 88% where they only found 12%

women primary characters. On a more positive note, a more recent content analysis from 2016

found an increase of women primary characters at 42%, though the rest of the women

characters were found to be not only secondary, but also tertiary characters (Lynch et al.,

2016). This increase is a reflection of the importance and strength that research on video game

representation of women have on improving the gaming culture.

Sexist Stereotypes of Woman Video Game Characters

Another game character trait that may inhibit a women player's video game

identification, is women being forced into stereotyped roles or sexual objectification (Dill et al.,

2005). Misrepresentations of women may stem from the gender inequity of designers in the

video game industry. The video game culture and industry have fewer female designers than

male designers because they are formed by an outdated patriarchal understanding of gender

whereby having computing technology knowledge remains linked to masculinity (Wacjman

1991, 2007). This lack of female designers leads to gender stereotypes which re-enforce a

masculine gaming culture. This masculine gaming culture then leads to the continuous struggle

to analyze women participation as equal comrades, and not as "girl gamers" who are in some

way different and less than their fellow male peers (Fisher et al. 2015). A deviating effect of this phenomenon is a hegemony of play which is the name for the effect of the gendered power formation of digital games production as examined by Fron et al. (2007). Fron at al. (2007) explained the hegemony of play is a theory that touches on the manner in which the digital game industry has melded individual and society's understanding of games with "values and norms that reinforce that industry's technological, commercial and cultural investments in a particular definition of games and play, creating a cyclical system of supply and demand in which alternate products of play are marginalized and devalued" (Fron et al., 2007, p.309). This normalizing of the patriarchal system is reflected in the representations of women in video games because historically men have been producing these games and these characters more often than women have. As a result of the unequal power dynamic in the video game industry, images of women are used in a controlling way by defining the restrictions and norms of women's presence in the digital domain that make these social injustices normalized (Collins 1990).

Often these images lead to sexist themes that further develop into noxious stereotypes portrayed in video game (Dietz 1998). For example, two themes analyzed by Glick and Fiske (2001) demonstrate these stereotypes. Sexism can arise from the notion of women's need for protection due to their being delicate or fragile. In addition, adverse sexism can also arise from the notion that women seek to control men through sex. The sexualization of women characters can also be described as the male gaze. The male gaze is the same as objectification where the media puts emphasis on women's bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Examples of this objectification are accentuated buttocks, pronounced breasts, and wearing suggestive

and/or erotic clothes (Jansz & Martis, 2007). Several analyses have found that video games

generally present men as protagonist while women tend to be sexualized characters (Glaubke

et al., 2001; Williams et al., 2009; Vandenbosch et al., 2016). These studies of

underrepresentation and misrepresentations of women characters seem to have negative

effects on players, especially on women, thus the following set of research questions come

forth from the literature examining the portrayals of women video game characters.

RQ2a: How do women game players feel about women characters portrayed in video

games?

RQ2b: How do these feelings affect what kind of games they play?

However, though there have been many claims that these sexualizations of women

characters lead to negative effects in players, there have also been a few studies suggesting

that although women characters may be sexualized they are not automatically inept or

submissive to their male counterparts (Schleiner, 2001). Some additional positive directions

video games have taken toward women characters were studied by Grimes (2003). Grimes

found that women protagonists, aside from their sexualized images, exemplified traits

stemmed from male gender norms such as intelligence and toughness. Historically, women

were portrayed as the trope "damsel in distress", perpetual victims needing to be saved (Breuer

et al., 2015) due to their helpless or innocent nature with less capabilities than any male

characters (Miller & Summers, 2007). These positive female portrayals provide role models for

women players by giving them representations that break gender norms and "provide an entry

point to an otherwise highly male dominated medium," (Grimes, 2003, p. 2). Alternatively, the

sexualization of these women characters could be embraced by some women players as

embracing their sexuality and be seen as empowerment (Levy, 2005). It seems that some women do not disapprove of or take offense to sexualization of women. For example, when the findings of a study conducted by the American Psychology Association task force in 2007 to observe the significance of the sexualization of women were compared to results from a similar study in 1991, it was found that less women believed sexualized portrayals to be offensive (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). This contradicting claim of empowerment through sexualization leads me to my last research question:

RQ 3: How do women game players feel about sexualized women characters?

Method

This study used a qualitative methodology, specifically focus groups. Focus groups are a method of social science research, in which a group of 8 to 12 participants with certain shared characteristics are led in a discussion on a particular topic, (Byers & Wilcox, 1988). An advantage of focus groups over individual interviews, according to Coenen, Stamm, Stucki, and Cieza (2012), is that more ideas are generated as a result of the participants feeding off each other's thoughts. The study's focus groups required all participants to identify as a woman, since the purpose of the study is to explore women's perceptions of video game representations of women. The participants were adults of at least 18-years-of-age due to IRB restrictions. This study was a smaller focus group project with the use of three groups of 5 to 7 participants, with a total of 17 participants. Out of the 17 participants, 16 identified as white and 1 identified as biracial and all of them identified as women. Ages were from 19 to 37 years old. A vast portion were graduate students with a variety of past experience and recent experience with video games.

Focus groups are led by a moderator who follows a list of questions or topics called an interview schedule. According to Goldman (1962), the relationship between the moderator and the participants is the most important element in obtaining useful information in the discussion. For this reason, the researcher served as the moderator, as she had commonalities with the participants, such as identifying as a woman and experience playing video games. These commonalities led to a good rapport while allowing flexibility with the interview schedule when needed.

Focus groups allow for both complimentary and argumentative interactions among participants, which offers both consensual and contrasting data. Both types of interaction allow for interpretations of the varying opinions about the representations of women in video games. Another purported benefit of focus groups over individual interviews is that focus groups allow the opportunity to gather numerous people's opinions quickly. Focus groups gave the opportunity to gather many people's opinions and insights quickly while also employing the group effect method to help participants to draw upon one another's shared thoughts. Interviews were recorded for audio and visual via Zoom and were then later transcribed. Transcriptions of the interview were used for coding themes that aid in the interpretation of what the participants say. A codebook was created to organize the categories, codes, and interpretations.

Protocol

Recruitment for participants was done via posts on the Discord chat for the Auburn University Computer Gaming Club, flyers around the Auburn University campus and a game store in Columbus, Georgia, as well as an automated mass email to all graduate students

attending Auburn University. The posts, flyers and emails directed volunteers to an electronic consent/information letter through Qualtrics. After they consented, participants were told to leave a contact information for the researcher to be able to reach out to them with dates. Every volunteer was sent an email or text message giving her three set focus group dates and times from which to choose. Once participants replied back with their preferred dates, they received a confirmation and a link to the Zoom meeting. This sample's convenience led to mostly Auburn University students, as they were the most convenient population for this study and due to the high rate of people from which a sample could be generated. Incentives of an opportunity to meet and socialize with other women game players and the opportunity to voice their opinions about female video game characters was shared via the posts.

The focus groups were conducted online via Zoom as this provided a safe setting for the participants during the 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic. Conducting focus groups over Zoom also allowed the participants to be in a comfortable, calm, and quiet setting of their choice. Focus groups were held late afternoon after 4 p.m. to ensure students were able to come when most classes were done. The dates of the focus groups were February 11th, February 28th, and March 2nd 2021.On February 11th, there were 5 participants. On February 28th, there were 7 participants. Lastly, on March 2nd, there were 5 participants. Each focus group session was ended after 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed later with Zoom's capabilities and an artificial intelligence transcription application, Sonix.ai.

During the focus groups, participants were asked to have their preferred names displayed so that the moderator could call on each participant one at a time. However, when transcribing, their real names were edited to a pseudonym that is used when attributing

quotes, to give the participants a measure anonymity. Participants were also asked to keep themselves muted until called on by the moderator and were told that after every question the moderator would call on every participant to hear her opinions. The moderator also explained to the participants that it was acceptable for them to have no opinion on any questions. The moderator also reminded participants that they were allowed to freely leave the focus group at any time with no consequences.

The sole researcher was also the moderator, as they had the knowledge about video games to be able to understand the lingo the participants used and experiences they shared, thus giving the moderator the ability to use probing questions to prompt further information. An interview schedule (see Appendix A) was used to ensure that the exact same questions were asked in each focus group giving an added structured component.

Data Analysis

All three focus groups were transcribed in full with Sonix.ai, an artificial intelligence transcription platform. Transcripts were edited for clarification, as well as for de-identification by removing all references to real names and adding pseudonyms to allow anonymity. The three focus groups produced over 65 pages of transcription and notes.

The data is reliable due to the use of an interview schedule to make certain the same questions were asked in each focus group, thus providing a reliability in this study. The questions in the interview schedule are valid as they all pertain to my research questions and focus on video games and women video game characters to ensure only data about these subjects are measured. In addition, participants could ask questions and clarify if they were unsure of what something meant. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data.

Charmaz explains that a grounded theory approach allows for multiple core categories to emerge from an analysis, that can then be organized into overarching core categories that connect to subcategories in order to create a broader understanding (as cited in Mohammed et al., 2020). In grounded theory, reality and knowledge is believed to be social constructs (Charmaz, 2014), that can become apparent through the stories participants tell. Further, the stories participants tell are interpreted through the researcher's perspective (Charmaz, 2017).

Repeated readings, coding, and note-taking were completed by the sole researcher. All of the data were recorded in detail in a codebook so the categories could be compared to one another. Transcripts were coded and organized into over-arching themes found across all three focus groups. The themes were broken into three broad over-arching themes - quantity of women portrayals vs. quality of women portrayals; issues with identification and immersion; and improved representations given and still needed. The analysis of these themes was interpreted using the feminist and video-game identification theories defined earlier.

Results

The participants discussed a variety of concerns they had with women portrayals in video games, how this affected their ability to connect or identify with women characters, as well as voiced their approval of certain improved portrayals while discussing the representation they believe is still missing. There was an overwhelming sense of comradery among the women gamers where often times they agreed with one another but also did not hold back if they disagreed. Every focus group ended with new friendships with the participants exchanging phone numbers, emails, and gamer tags. Overall, there was an agreement that portrayals and

representation were improving, even if it was not as quickly achieved as some believed it should be.

It's Not the Quantity, it's the Quality

When asked about the amount of female representation, a common argument made was the quantity of women portrayals versus the quality of women portrayals. Many participants were happy to report that most games gave at least one women option for them to choose:

> Nowadays I am never, you know, I never feel like I have to play a male character.
> I feel like there's always a female option in the types of games I play now. (Ruby,
> 24)

However, that dulled when compared to the amount of male characters they could choose from in games. Participants voiced that being given so few female options, they felt like video game producers were merely trying to give a token girl or check a box to be inclusive:

> Just because women are an option doesn't mean, like 'oh cool, we've ticked off
> that box'. Like you know, 'women are satisfied'. Like, no, we want more
> substantial characters. (Michelle, 24)

If the participants wanted to ensure they could see a variety of women characters, they would opt for girl games often described as puzzle games, dress up games, or simulators, such

as *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery*, *Nancy Drew*, and *Hollywood Rising Star*, or they would have to play a game in which you could customize the playable character, such as MMOs (massive multiplayer online) such as *League of Legends* and *Guild Wars* were identified by participants; or with RPGs (role playing games) such as *Witcher*, *Skyrim* and *Assassins Creed: Odyssey*. Participants could not find more representation in the mainstream games which they referred to as "more dominated by male characters". One participant commented on this occurrence being a reflection of games being gendered stereotypically:

Why if the games have mostly women or even an equal amount of women, why does it have to be more of a 'girly game'? Like even in these dress up games and stuff, there's often a male character that you're supposed to fawn over. (June, 21)

Fewer women characters often meant a lesser quality of female representation as well. For example, participants argued that these women characters were "just participating" and were portrayed as idealistic/sexualized, shallow character depth, and were weaker. One participant suggested:

In a lot of the games there is a female participating, but they don't really develop as much as the male characters. (Lucy, 24)

Firstly, the participants' primary quality issue of women characters was with the hyper sexualization of the female characters bodies. All of the participants agreed that sexualization of the female body happened in three different displays that often overlapped: scantily clad, idealistic body, and clothing used to enhance the body. Most noted was the size of a women character's breasts, which nine participants claimed were exaggerated proportions. One participant noted of several women characters:

But they're huge chested. It's kind of obscene. (Kate, 37)

The enlarged size of the women characters breasts was also sometimes paired with "boob physics" in which some character's code had been written to have extra jiggle in the breasts and rear anytime they moved.

The developers specifically coded this, so they know what they're doing. The character will stay still but the boobs and the butt will jiggle, not one or two times, but three or four times when you move them or even when I load in my female character. Her butt, her boobs will…And everyone knows boobs don't do that. (Bailey, 28)

Again, participants who were quick to explain that these designs were highly idealized phenomena that were created with male players as the target audience. Bailey and other participants also voiced their offense over the intentionality of the video game producers as

they were the ones to create and design the female characters with such exaggerated and

sexualized features. One participant defined this catering to male fans as fanservice as it is the

original goal of the female character did not seem to be just to be attractive and was originally

one with depth.

Additionally, participants added that the majority of women characters were either very

thin with little to no muscle mass or they were very muscular and a "strong tank of a woman"

as one participant remarked. A general lack of body shape variety was missing such as midsized

or plus size characters. Participants wanted women characters to have a normal amount of

muscle mass to prove they can do all of the action posed in game. As one participant said,

> realistic

> You don't really need big boobs to fight, but you need some legs…Like you've got

> the muscles to do the job. (Amy, 31)

Simultaneously, these idealized body proportions were often paired with a scarce amount of

clothing. The clothing was typically not used for modesty but rather for enhancing the idealized

body of the female character. One participant remarked on Lara Croft's very short shorts and

tight crop top tee shirt, saying the clothing drew "way too much attention" to her body to be

considered an equal representation of women. A common combination of these two visuals,

were what participants referred to as "bikini armor".

Several participants discussed how this was counterproductive as bikini armor does not

cover the stomach, most of the chest, or legs of the women character's body and, therefore,

cannot be used for proper protection. One participant added:

Usually, for those, or when there is a female character, she is not dressed for the

battle. And it's like, 'well I'm glad that we can be confident in your body and be

sexy, but also, I'm going to die when I get shot because nothing's protecting me.

(Tina, 25)

However, two participants did clarify that even though the "bikini armor" did not visually cover

the body enough to look like viable armor, it still served its purpose and gave the female

characters the same amount of defense as the male's armor. Further, one participant noted

that she felt that some games make the female character lose more clothing as she leveled up.

Similarly, another participant also noted women lose more clothing as they got hurt in the

fighting game *Jump Start*. These games make it a goal for players to see the women wear less

clothing, but the participants found this to be counterproductive and irritating. The

sexualization of these women characters make women players annoyed and unhappy with the

visual representation of their gender identity in video games. Especially counterproductive, was

a character trope that one participant brought up about two separate women characters

(Dorothea of *Fire Emblem* and Ann of *Persona 5*) who ironically had backstories of not wanting

to be sexualized, yet they still were sexualized by their scantily and/or tightly clad bodies. One

participant said,

Dorothea [Fire Emblem], she's one of my favorites. And like her whole point is

also just kind of not wanting to be sexualized by the people around her and stuff.

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But then in times… she still is wearing like a revealing outfit and a lot of the later

costumes, she can wear, show, a lot of cleavage…And it's just annoying because

that's what her character doesn't really want…I haven't played Persona 5, but

I've watched a few play throughs. And I think a character [Ann] goes through a

similar kind of thing where she doesn't want to be sexualized, [yet] her costume

is very suggestive and like skintight. (Cynthia, 19)

The sexualization of women characters was an ongoing undertone to most of the issues the

participants spoke about, beyond their physical appearance, such as their

simplistic/stereotypical personalities, weaker positions, and hands off fighting style. All of these

issues can be linked back to developers trying to provide an idealistic version of women to

provide for their targeted audience of male players. As one participant put it,

So that's my main point, is that they need to kind of get away from trying to

attract more male gamers by making sexualized characters and just make normal

looking women, honestly. (Lucy, 24)

Secondly, participants often spoke of how simple female characters' personalities were

in comparison to the complexity give to male characters. Many participants voiced their

concerns over women characters only given stereotypes for their personalities making them

feel pigeon-holed. As one participant said,

There was just always like, 'OK, here's the one sexy girl and here's the one

airhead girl. And she's going to be the strong girl.' And you know, but like, I want

them all in one. (Amy, 31)

Participants discussed how these stereotypes are unwanted as women have varied and

complex personalities in reality, and, therefore, these complexities should be reflected in

portrayals. One participant stated:

They usually have a very basic personality. You don't really see them have all of

these very wide emotions other than just angry, sad. And it would just be nice to

see them be more like a person, than just oh, there's the female having her

emotions over there. (Lucy, 24)

A few stereotypes that were mentioned were of the feisty, sassy, or bossy women characters

that only had that one personality trait that was also sexualized according to one participant. A

different participant also mentioned the rape backstory stereotype that were thrust on women

villains making their backstories dominated by men. One participant shared,

Like a woman becomes damaged because of her past history with an abusive

relationship. And that's used as the excuse because, you know, women aren't

supposed to be villains. (Gabrielle, 37)

Multiple participants noted one reason for the simplistic or stereotypical personality given to women characters, is because of the role of sexualized romantic interest forced upon them. Another reason could be because the developers are just supplying a token girl as mentioned previously.

Thirdly, the women characters were described multiple times by various participants to be weaker than the male characters in the same the games. The weakness encompassed a combination of emotional, physical, and mental deficiencies. Many participants voiced their concern with the physical weakness of women characters in their stats, or in their purpose of being damsels in distress who needs to be saved due to their weakness and inability to protect themselves. Others again noted characters' visual appearance with no muscles as weakness. However, some participants did add that while occasionally there are some strong women characters, they are still stereotyped to be the tank of a woman who is more stereotypically male than female. Still others fall into the feisty or sassy sexualized stereotypes who lack any other complexities to their characters. As one participant mentioned,

I definitely would like to see just a general broader representation of the different types of women out there in the world. It's not like, like other people said, like a woman's who's just hyper masculine or just a woman that's hyper feminine. (Lily, 21)

In addition, women characters are often seen as having hands off fighting styles which heightens their perceived weak status when viewed by the participants. Participants explained

how most of the women characters would be support characters which provided healing to other players fulfilling the nurturer stereotype often pushed on women. For example, three participants noted that most of the characters in the support class in *League of Legends* were female characters. Women characters were also said to be magic users that would often never use their hands in physical combat. These portrayals made the women players feel as if the women characters were too weak to fight in combat alongside the male characters. One participant said,

> I mean, I've just grown up always knowing that the female as the support role or as the helper or the nurturer… in my mindset, it would be very difficult to see a female character in another role, as far as, like being the head of a household, or as in, you know, the go getter kind of person. Because I don't see females in that kind of roles as far as video games go, I don't necessarily know where I would like to see females. I would love to see females in a role of being in charge without being bossy or without being, a bit, for lack of a better word. I would you know; I just would like to see that a female can just be. A person without having to have an underlying tone of something a little feminine or masculine. Just being a person. (Leah, 20)

They Just Aren't Good Enough

Due to all of the issues with women portrayals in video games, most of the women participants admitted to often having issue identifying or connecting with any one woman character. Participants found the representations of women in games to be unsatisfying enough

to stop them from being able to identify themselves wholly or at all. Many participants claimed they may be able to connect with one or two aspects of a women character's personality, but never completely. As one participant said,

Usually, the games that have a lot of characters I can usually like find attributes from each one that I connect to, but not really like one character entirely…And I would like to see that at some point. But who knows when that might happen? (Cynthia, 19)

This inability to identify wholly to any woman character made the participants unable to become immersed in any game, as one participant stated:

Seeing myself in characters, is like, I've just never come across, like what Michelle said. Just the female characters aren't good enough and they don't allow for that. (Ophelia, 20)

A few participants voiced their disappointment with never being able to become fully immersed in a video game. Similarly, the participants often spoke about wanting to mostly play games in which they could customize the characters to look like themselves to try to achieve a level of identification with a character. Two participants also liked to customize characters into what they found atheistically pleasing. One participant explained how she becomes self-conscious when forced to play as a woman character that looked idealistic/ sexualized:

28

I'm 5'9", almost 5'10", and I yeah, it's very frustrating whenever I play as a

female character sometimes, and they're just like super short and cutesy and like

I'm 'oh'. I've always been self-conscious about my height and I don't like how tall

I am, but it just kind of exacerbates that whenever the character I play is like

super cute and short. (Michelle, 24)

In contrast, another participant explained how she wasn't able to identify with a stronger

woman character. Only two participants voiced being able to connect with any characters,

woman or man, due to abilities.

Regardless of their inability to fully connect or identify with women characters, the

majority of participants admitted to almost exclusively choosing to play women characters

when given the choice. Participants explained that they will choose to be a woman character

the majority of the time because that is the gender they identify with personally. As one

participant stated,

I was always sort of forced to experience vicariously these adventure stories

through the male eyes and male experiences, and so when I got older and female

protagonists in video games became more popular, I jumped at the chance to

experience these adventures stories through a body that seems like mine that I

could identify with. And I felt like that was revolutionary. (Gabrielle, 37)

Many also believed that choosing to play as the gender they identified with would aid in immersion, even though the majority of them admitted to not being able to connect wholly to any women characters and experience immersion. As one participant stated,

> I mean when I play video games, I like to be something larger than myself, you want to feel like this action superhero and it's easier to pretend that that character is you if they look like you. So, I mean, there's only so much you can make a male character look like you. Like, 'I'm still looking male'. And so, it just helps me feel like I'm more into the game if I'm playing as a female and I mean I can still have a great time playing a video game if it's a male character, but it just is so much more immersive if it's as a female character. (Iris, 20)

One participant voiced she felt like a traitor to women if she did not choose a woman character. Similarly, another participant felt the need to play and win in competitive games as a woman character to be spiteful due to the lack of representation she found.

> But I remember in all the, pretty much all the competitive games I play, you know, I always remember picking a female character out of spite, like, 'I'm going to win and I'm going to win with the female character'. (Michelle, 24)

However, when all the participants thoughts and comments are considered, it's obvious that that majority of the participants could not connect with any one-woman character due to the

lack of better portrayals of women despite the participants strong desires and attempts to fully immerse with female characters.

We've Gotten Less Sexy. Now Let's Get Even More Realistic.

Despite all of the problematic representations the participants noted, every participant also noted that women character portrayals were definitively improving, even if it was not at the speed they wish it to be. Several participants were happy to report that the improved representations were proof that game producers were waking up or realizing that there are more women video game players than they maybe thought previously. A few of the same women characters were repeated by multiple participants as examples of improved female representation. These characters were Alloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn*, Kassandra from *Assassins Creed Odyssey*, and Chell and Glados from *Portal*. Each of the characters was described as the improvement the participants wanted to see continue in future video games for the same reason these characters were mostly non-stereotyped or hypersexualized representation. However, none of these characters were considered a perfect representation by the participants due to the characters still being stereotyped in some way or fashion.

One character participants thought was especially progressive was Alloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn.* The participants mentioned Alloy's status of being the sole protagonist and being a woman, as a true contrast to most video games. One participant noted that some video game producers refuse to make women-only protagonists because of their fear of losing male players; however, she argued that *Horizon Zero Dawn* is still a popular mainstream game despite having only a female protagonist. Other common reasons participant mentioned Alloy was due to the character not being thrust into a romance nor being sexualized in her

appearance (i.e., being fully clothed with small breasts and buttocks proportions). As one

participant claimed about Alloy:

> Yes, she's a woman. But that's not part of the story. Like, that's not why she is
>
> special or that's not why she's outcast. Because she's a woman. She's outcast
>
> because she's like an orphan and she's got stuff in her past and stuff like that.
>
> But literally, she could be a man, or a woman and it wouldn't make a difference.
>
> And I love that. That's the epitome of inclusivity. (Michelle, 24)

Michelle's comment points to what could be seen as a "genderless" storyling, or one not

dependent on gender, as a sign of inclusivity. However, some participants noted Alloy

was still very thin and attractive by our societal standards. Therefore, while Alloy was

pointed out as a progressive character, she did not escape a gendered representation

completely.

The next example discussed was Kassandra from *Assassins Creed Odyssey*. Multiple

participants claimed Kassandra was the reason they began playing *Assassins Creed* because it

gave them a chance to be a woman. Additionally, participants mentioned several times how

Kassandra was a strong woman who could hands-on fight well and had a tall muscular

physique. The participants also claimed they honestly liked Kassandra's story more than the

male optional character's story due to Kassandra's complex personality and more concrete

storyline. Finally, participants voiced their pleasure in being able to choose Kassandra's sexual

orientation through game choices. Yet in the end, participants spoke of their disappointment

that the ending of the story for Kassandra felt like they were forced to marry a man and have a

family despite their sexual orientation chosen for Kassandra. As one participant recalled,

> I remember in *Odyssey* with Kassandra, players were really upset when
>
> Kassandra was forced to have a heterosexual relationship and have a baby,
>
> because a lot of players, myself included, played Kassandra as basically a lesbian
>
> or bisexual. And then she was forced to make this very traditional family choice.
>
> And it made everyone kind of irate, which I think was good. That shows that
>
> we're progressing a bit. But even Kassandra, who I see as the epitome of, you
>
> know, strong female protagonists, at least before Eivor came along, she needed
>
> this traditional domestic life. (Gabrielle, 37)

The final examples examined by participants were two women characters from the

same video game - Chell, the protagonist, and Glados, the villain, from *Portal*. When the

participants brought up Portal as the pinnacle of female representation within a video game,

they spoke of Glados, the villain more than the protagonist. When they spoke of Chell as being

a great character because she was a blank slate, like other first person shooter games, except

she happened to be a woman. Participants agreed that having a blank slate woman first person

shooter game helped them connect more with a video game character than any other

representations due to the fact that you could not see Chell most of the gameplay.

However, Glados was the most important character for most of the participants due to

her wit and villainous status. Participants thought Glados broke the mold of women characters

because she was allowed to be a villain without a male-driven background. She was allowed to be smart (she was artificial intelligence), and she was allowed to be funny. Participants claimed that Glados being funny, and smart were very important parts of her character as other women characters often were not allowed to have those characteristics. Participants found this new variation to a woman character's personality to be refreshing and successful, with one participant exclaiming:

> She's just a fantastically written character, like her quips are incredibly hilarious.
> (Cynthia, 19)

Additionally, a participant also used Portal to argue how women could create better and better women characters since Portal was made by a woman, Kim Swift.

> This game where the women are in the interesting roles is, of course designed by a woman. I think male developers are getting better at it. They're responding to market pressure. I do think women would be a bit quicker on the uptake though.
> (Ruby, 24)

Similarly, most of the participants agreed that if more women were in the video game production business, then maybe there would be a lot better representation of women in video games. All of the participants felt that the focus group discussion alone was enough proof that women could create better representations because they would be able to recognize the

inaccuracies of the stereotypical representations of women video game characters and bring

awareness to the rest of the production team.

> I feel like if there were just one woman who felt comfortable, like speaking up,
>
> like, 'wait, maybe don't put them in that outfit'. Like, you know, 'put them in
>
> something a little bit more practical', I don't know. I just wish more women were
>
> consulted or like some sort of, like, reaction panel, or, you know, during a beta
>
> test. I just, I do feel like, you know, if more women were included in the process,
>
> they could be like, 'wait, we can't relate to that.' (Michelle, 24)

However, these examples of improved representations still left out a lot of the other

improvements needed according to the participants. Most of the participants noted

some physical traits that need to be added to female representation, such as a variety of

body shapes and sizes, more skin tones, more hair textures and more practical clothing.

Other traits listed by participants called for more ability representation, a variety of

female emotions allowed without stereotypes, not having to prove themselves to the

male characters, and more complex personalities. A few participants also added that

there needs to be improvements with the relationships, such as more platonic

relationships, female friendships, mother-daughter relationships, and normalizing

LGBTQ relationships. Further, one participant voiced their want for trans experiences to

be represented, while another called for older women and mothers who are still missing

from lead roles in video games. Overall, the participants are happy with the

improvements that have been made, but they know there are still a lot more improvements to go. As one participant proclaimed, "We've gotten less sexy. Now let's get even more realistic." (Tina, 25)

Discussion

This study found that though many of the players were unsatisfied with the stereotypical representation they often found in women characters, they all agreed that the representations are improving slowly. However, although these representations are improving, this study aligned with previous studies showing negative representations negatively affect players. For example, negative representations of women hurt player's self-confidence when compared to sexualized women characters (Skowronski, Busching, & Krahé, 2021) and negatively impact their video game identification (Miele, 2020).

Issues with Identification

This study found that participants often could not self-identify with female video game characters, not even with the improved characters they named. Not being able to self-identify means the players cannot relate to the gender roles portrayed in the games they are playing. Unfortunately, this inability to self-identify is a common occurrence within the media women consume (Brown & Knight, 2015). If women find difficulty in identifying with the representations they see within media, it should be a warning that the gender roles we are suggesting women play are not the roles in which they wish to be. According to Eisend (2019), the media we consume influences our "perceptions, attitudes, values, and behavior," (p. 73). This influence then leads to societal effects, such as replicating and encouraging stereotypical gender roles in media consumers. An example of one of the gender roles the participants of this

study were unhappy with is the damsel in distress trope. They saw this misrepresentation in multiple games throughout their experiences. Breur et al. (2015) found similar findings in their research. Certainly, if women are unhappy with their represented gender roles in media, men must be having the same difficulty as well. Gendered sex roles lead to universally forced gender norms which harms everyone. Media organization leaders, including video games producers, should have an ethical responsibility to society to break those stereotypical gender roles. Video game players should hold video game producers to this ethical standard with through their purchases. Gamers need to play an active role in promoting the end of gendered sex roles in video games so that the cycle is broken.

Participants also argued that there is not enough representation in video games, which limited the participants' ability to choose a female character with which they could identify. Some of the representations the participants noted as missing were minorities, people with varying physical and mental abilities, mid-sized or plus-sized bodies, older women, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender or nonbinary women, and mothers. The participants often claimed they were not like the female characters they chose to play, but rather they simply picked the female option available. As one study participant explained:

I always pick Peach not because I feel like, oh cool, she's just like me. I'm like if

I'm going to win, I'm going to win with a female character. (Michelle, 24)

If there were more varied and representative female characters in video games,

situation such as this one would be less likely to happen.

In order to identify with characters in any way the participants had to find small aspects of female characters that reflected who the female video games players felt they were. When players realize they can only identify with a few aspects of their characters it halts their ability to immerse. Jennett et al. (2008) claim that immersion is the key element to successful and enjoyable games as they have the ability to draw their players into gameplay. Immersion can occur when a player loses the ability to self-reflect, has a distorted perception of time and increased concentration to complete a goal (Michalidis et al., 2018). This inability to immerse often leads players to have feelings of disappointment lowering their self-confidence., Klimmt et al.(2009) discussed the same negative emotions occurring within players when they noticed the differences between their self-identity and the idealized versions of their identity in game play. This disconnection led into feelings of guilt or shame. If players feel only negative emotions when trying to self-identify with characters, they will begin to quit playing these games. This situation means there will be a need many female gamers have that is left unfulfilled. Gaming companies should take note as this situation could lead to a loss of an important consumer market for the video game industry.

While the participants of this study could come close to identifying with more aspects from the improved women characters such as Alloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* or Kassandra from *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, they still could not wholly identify and fully immerse within the game. Again, this inability to identify with improved characters is an indication that women are not satisfied with the gender roles video games normalize. Participants often felt strong dislike toward the stereotypical and/or sexualized representations of women and could not identify at all with those characters. Participants were offended by the stereotypes or idealized versions of

their own gender identity, making comments such as having the "appearance of just [a] sexy model. It's just ridiculous," (Bailey, 28). Participants were also unsatisfied with the bodies of both male and female characters. As one participant said,

I've never seen like a mid-size or plus sized character…There's a lack of diversity and just size in female characters. Like you see the different sizes of male characters, [but] honestly male characters could also use more diversity in their size. (Ophelia, 20)

With better and a wider range of representations of women, such as people of color, mothers, older women, lesbian, bi-sexual, nonbinary, or transgender women, and a variety of physical and mental ability representations, female players should be able to identify with at least one character in each game they play. Intersectionality needs to be represented with combinations of a variety of backgrounds and experiences that create individually unique life experiences. Video game producers could provide more character depth to female characters if they represented the complexity of intersectionality. If video game producers created female characters with a variety of abilities, strengths and opinions, they could give women players a better chance at connecting with a more complex and satisfying character similar to their own complex personality. The more positive female players feel about female representation, the more they will play, creating higher demand and need for diversified and less sexist video game content and characters. Women need to speak out and let video game companies and designers know not only that they aren't satisfied, but also why they aren't satisfied. They

might also need to talk with their wallets and not support these enterprises until real change is enacted. In turn, this new consumer demand and new consumer pressure should help video game companies realize how important it is for them to hire a more diverse staff in order to produce better video game content successfully.

In the short-term, video game companies could do their own research with female gamers to learn from their perspective. In the long-term, video game companies could truly support this revolution by supporting STEM programs in schools or summer camps that focus on girls and minorities as participants. Video game companies could also develop scholarships and internship programs to diversity the future workforce of their industry.

Quantity vs. Quality

While the participants mainly believed they were misrepresented in video games, they were optimistic about some recent and more positive representations. Most of the participants in this study were unsatisfied with the representations they see in a majority of games. When women are unhappy with female representation in video games, they play less, and video game production companies will lose the 59% (Clement, 2021) of consumers that women encompass. As explained by Caddy (2020) when women lose interest in video games, they also lose interest in exploring video game production careers, which will lead to a further lack of diversity in production teams and will further be reflected in the same, flat stereotypes of characters produced for players. A lack of diversity, both in game and in production teams, also leads to stale stories that players have seen multiple times over. Idealized and under-representation of female characters also harm male players. If male players continually see stereotypical representations of women, they will internalize and believe these stereotypes as truth. Some

men may then act out and try to force women into those stereotypical gender roles in real life. Better representations of women are important to every gamer because without them no one other than white, Cis, men will feel as if they belong in gaming culture.

As an exception to the previous discussion, the participants of this study were mainly satisfied with MMOs or RPGs in which they could customize their characters to look however they wanted. Unfortunately, these character were often blank slate with no personality. Therefore, despite these limitations, a blank-slate character, is a preferable option for women gamers. Customization and blank-slate personalities allowed participants to apply whatever aesthetics and characteristics they wanted to on their character. This ability to select features was preferable to being pigeon-holed in a stereotypical role. Again, if women rather choose a character with no give sex roles, that choice reflects their dissatisfaction with the sex roles provided to them by the video game producers. Additionally, participants claimed customization aided the most in partial identification and immersion for the women players. A, quick and somewhat easy solution to improving immersion for women could be to create more games that allow customization and blank characteristics so that the female players could live vicariously through their created female characters. However, creating more blank-slate characters will not ensure all players see better intersectional representations in the characters they play. Without transformational female characters, video gamer producers run the risk of alienating girl gamers and others who seek better representation and fresh game narratives. Video game producers will again let these loyal consumers down and will ultimately discourage diverse perspectives and diverse teams in the industry. Everett (2009) argues that though there is a commonly held notion that a digital divide has caused minorities to lag behind white and

mostly male users who were early adopters of video game technology; however, the real reason could be a lack of representation in video game culture. Due to the white male hegemonic video game culture, minorities cannot find enough representations in video games.

Sexualized Female Representation

Overall, the participants of this study believed that the sexualized women characters found in video games were misrepresentations of women. They were concerned about the idealization of female bodies and how those misrepresentations made women compare their own bodies to fantasy. In addition, these participants worried about how these characters might affect younger players who may be more impressionable to such images. Idealized and sexualized representations of women have been found to harm adolescents body image (Beasley & Standley, 2002). However, these sexualized female characters do not only harm women, Blackburn and Scharrer (2019) found that some young adult male, as well as female, game players were more likely to accept masculinity as aggressive, dominant, tough, and suppressive of emotions, which leads to a perspective that further marginalizes (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and sexualizes women. Many of the participants also mentioned how sexualized female characters were not designed to attract women players to the game, but rather to attract heterosexual men players. However, it seems the video game industry is wrongly assuming what their heterosexual male players want to see in female characters. For example, Reinhard (2006) found that male players may prefer thicker bodied curvy females over the exaggerated and idealized female bodies characters are given. This assumption about what male players prefer in female characters also pigeonholes all males into one category of consumer. Real women will never look like the overly exaggerated proportions of female video

game characters, and if male players are conditioned to find such bodies as ideal, males will have more objectifying thoughts and negative beliefs about women that increase the support of rape myths (Tompkins, 2018). If males are led to believe that the idealized body proportions of sexualized female characters are real, they will internalize and recreate these beliefs and desires in their lives thus continuing in the toxic white heterosexual male hegemony.

In contrast, a few study participants argued that sexualized female characters give women players a sense of empowerment to "live vicariously" through the character. As one participant explained,

> I don't think sexualization in games is a bad thing. However, it should be of their own choice and not necessarily like, some other [outside] party wants them to do it or be sexualized in that sense… Not myself, but I do have like a least one of my friends who does enjoy playing like a more provocative character (Lily, 21, Biracial)

Claims of empowerment from sexualized characters are similar to the findings of Levy's study which also found some women players expressed empowerment through sexualized characters (2005) Finding empowerment in such female characters is not surprising. Many of the participants claimed that simply playing as a female character while winning or being successful at a game was empowering. It was empowering because it helped smash the common assumption that male players are the more skilled and hard-core gamers within the video game community. Participants wanted to prove their abilities and skills against the male players in order to make a space from themselves as females in the video game community. As more women players are accepted into the masculine video game community, the more they

will feel a sense of belonging. With a better sense of belonging, more women will be encouraged to join the industry and help create better representations of diverse characters who could then create narratives more enjoyable and fresher for everyone. Once more women players are accepted within the male-dominated video game community, the more female characters can either be desexualized or recreated to give female players confidence and empowerment. The masculine video game culture and sexist belief that women gamers are less skilled in video games is reflected in Paaßben et al.'s (2017) study which examined how male gamers felt they were hard-core gamers because they played more seriously for achievements and skills unlike female gamers who they thought played casually for the story alone.

Additionally, sexualized female characters are a part of a common perception that video game producers cater to male players under the false claim that their consumers are mostly male. This false assumption is important to understand because statistics show a shift in the demographics of gamers from a majority male to majority female. Without a change in how video games are produced and how characters are developed, the industry could see a huge loss of consumers. If video game companies do not hasten improvements, they may lose half of their consumers. Even more importantly without these changes, the toxic masculine video game culture will continue to harm everyone by reproducing stereotypes/sexualizations of women thus leading to hostile sexism in men as found by LaCroix (2018). As Carilli and Campbell (2012) stated media have a very important role in reflecting and reproducing our society's views and beliefs of women's roles. Thus, the ability to stop the cycle of sexism that is found in the video game community can begin by delivering better representations of women to encourage more engagement from female players which in turn would create a positive

space for women within the video game community. This study is important by aiding the effort

to push video game producers for more equality in their representations of women. Such a

move could result in greater equality and inclusion for more than just women. Such a move for

all gender identities, races, and ages someday.

Video game producers have an ethical responsibility to promote equality and diversity

in their community by beginning with their own products. Once better representations of

women are created, more women players will find satisfaction and more enjoyment in gaming.

They will also be able to better identify with characters which will create space within the

masculine video game community. This sense of belonging and inclusions will lead women to

feel encouraged and more accepted as they consider entering into the video game industry.

Further, if women could hold executive positions in the video game production industry their

voices could truly be heard, and they could begin to make decisions which would deliver better

and less harmful representations for women in video games. Hopefully with the inclusion of

women, people of color, people of different abilities, and people of different sexual identities

would also feel welcomed to join the video game community as well. More diversity within the

industry is necessary to deliver more equality and realism in video game character

representation.

Limitations

This study had three limitations. First, the sample size needs to be bigger to provide

more variety of opinions from participants and, therefore, larger and different data. Finding

participants was especially difficult due to social limitations caused by COVID. Due to COVID,

the researcher could not go to public gaming rooms and personally pull participants as

originally planned. Flyers were still used; however, all social gathering areas have been off limits

on campus so potential participants may not have seen the materials. Many students, including

international students, have opted for online classes due to the pandemic and international

traveling bans which might be another reason for a smaller sample size with no minorities.

Second, all of the participants were pulled from the same university and locale and, therefore,

could reflect a certain culture of video game players found only in that region. Third, the

sample size does not reflect minority groups perspectives which are desperately lacking for

video games studies. A lack of minorities in this study could be due to the first two limitations

of a small sample size pulled from one specific region. Auburn University, as of 2020, had a

mostly white population of 23,805 white students and only 4,441 minority students (2020). A

much larger and national sample size is needed in order to get a stronger interpretation and

glimpse into the complex perceptions of female video game players. Women of different

ethnicity, regions, and age have vastly different life experiences all of which deserve equal

representation.

Future Research

Further research is still needed to expand on women's perspectives of women video

game characters. More participants are needed in varying ages in order to understand better

how these portrayals are affecting every generation. More participants are also needed of racial

minority. Little has been studied on how women of racial minority are affected by

representations of their identity. More research, both qualitative and quantitative, needs to be

conducted to hear the voices that are desperately needed in the video game industry. Surveys

could be conducted as some participants feel safer and more comfortable in giving honest

answers anonymously or interviews/focus groups could be held to give them a place to voice their concerns in their own words. Qualitative methods could lead to better insights from participants that can help develop concise surveys that could lead to clearer results.

Additionally, further research needs to be conducted to find how women game players identify as gamers and why they feel the need to broadcast their gender identity to other players. The assumptions that male players have about female players being lesser skilled is important to study as it impacts everyone because the culture is blocking female players from the gaming community "precluding them from the positive outcomes of video game play such as enhanced access to fields of science, technology, and engineering" (Paaßben et al., 2017, p. 421). Further research also needs to be conducted on the possibility that certain genres of games may allow for easier identification and immersion for women game players. If more opinions and concerns were known, a wider array of representations could be found missing and a more suggestions could be given. Interviews/focus groups would provide the most in-depth context to their concerns as the study would give participants a space to use their own voice and not have anyone speak for them. There needs to be more research to push video game production companies into more equal female representations with all the gathered research. Further research could open possibilities for more equal representations of women in video games, which in turn could encourage more women to work in video game production. Encouraging women to work in video game production would begin a cycle of creating positive female characters, pulling in more women players, which would then encourage the hiring of more women and other minorities to broaden the types of characters found in video games.

Better representations of women could also be a push to begin re-visiting male characters and re-designing them to provide more variety and less stereotyped representation as well.

Conclusion

This study provided women players the ability to vocalize their opinions on general female representations within video games versus how they want to be represented. Most importantly this study found that these participants were mostly unsatisfied with the representations they found but were hopeful about future representations. So, sorry Mario, but our better representations are in another video game. However, the participants voiced concern over the slow and few improvements; they wanted to see more change and at a quicker pace. Video games have yet to meet women's expectations of better and equal representations. As some participants said, production companies need to increase the diversity in their staff and encourage more women to work in the video game production to help ensure better representation for women. As stated earlier, the time has come for video games companies to sponsor STEM programs and to encourage girls and minority youth to find their places within the video game community. Further, video game companies could develop scholarships and internship programs to encourage women and other minorities to enter the gaming industry. In 2019, only 24% of gaming industry employees were women, while 84% of gaming industry executives were male (Yokoi, 2021). More women and other minorities need to be in executive positions in order to ensure equality and inclusion in video game representation. Likewise, it is important to continue on studying and reflecting on women players perspective of representations every year to provide adequate feedback to the industry and to academia. More feedback from players themselves will allow their concerns to be

highlighted and seen by industry leaders, which should lead to positive changes which reflect

the players desired, inclusive, and intersectional representations of gender and other identities.

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

1. (Ice breaker question) What is your favorite video game and/or video game character and why?

2. Do you think there are an equal number of women and male characters in video games? On what do you base your opinion?

3. When you have the choice to choose a gender in a game, what gender do you choose? Why?

4. How do you think most women characters are portrayed?

5. Do you believe video game designers are now trying to represent women any differently from how they have in the past? Can you give any examples?

6. What is the worst women representation you have ever experienced in a video game? What makes this representation so bad?

7. Do you find it easy or difficult to "connect" with women characters in the majority of games? Why? What helps you to connect? What makes it difficult to connect? What would make it easier for you to connect with a character?

8. How would you like women to be depicted in games? Can you give some examples?

9. What aspects of your identity are not represented in the games you play?

10. What experiences do you wish would be represented more?

11. Any last remarks about women video game characters?