

ART 104 Group Final Project

Topic: Feminism and Gaming

Abstract:

The push for gender equality has consistently been a major issue present in today's society. The development of destructive, "established social norms" have led to the misrepresentation of women and groups of minorities in media, which only serve to reinforce these harmful social norms and ultimately shape the way in which we perceive different groups of people. Stemming from a culture constructed by men, the perception of women in society has taken a fall; they are visually degraded in games and portrayed as hypersexualized objects to be used for entertainment; they are subject to rude behavior, verbal abuse and sexual harassment; and they begin to criticize themselves for their appearance and self-worth in result of this offensive treatment. Games should not be defined as a male sport but rather as a source of entertainment for everyone.

Essay:

With the global expansion of the internet, many individuals have been subject to sexual harassment. In particular, more sexist actions have been present in today's rising gaming culture, evident in the games themselves as well as in their networked and internet based communities. Today, we see gender disparity, overtly sexual women game avatars, and institutional sexism. While it is impossible to totally eradicate sexism, the last decade has proven video games as one of the most powerful cultural influences of this generation. On the face of this issue, this intersectionality should be celebrated while the anonymity present in the internet echo chamber should be discouraged. It only puts a bandaid on the deep-rooted problem of people behaving in harmful ways without fear of repercussions.

Historically, women have been seen and treated as inferior to men — housewives, maids, home cooks, objects, caretakers of the home — any glance at advertisements from the 1950s will show this unfortunate view of women; a coffee advertisement was notorious for depicting a husband spanking his wife who was bent over his lap because she was not serving him "fresher coffee" — the advertisement proclaimed that their product would prevent husbands from beating their wives... over coffee.¹ Not only did they treat the issue of a husband beating his wife as an expected outcome, but they also used it as a selling point for their product. This kind of sentiment carried over into Hollywood as well and spread throughout the world. It used to be a common script that an American film star would be bombastic, muscled, and portrayed as a sexist hero while rescuing a damsel in distress (who is typically portrayed with revealing

¹ "Didn't I warn you about serving me bad coffee? Outrageously sexist adverts from the 1950s when society believed a woman's place was firmly in the home," *Daily Mail* (December 2012), <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2254806/Didnt-I-warn-serving-bad-coffee-Outrageously-sexist-ads-1950s-shocking-domestic-scenes-subservient-women-carrying-domestic-duties-husbands.html>.

clothing).² Johnny Cage, a playable character from the game series *Mortal Kombat*, reflects this archetype. However, before video games took up the mantle of being the biggest entertainment industry, movies have (and still are) a major part of media, and subsequently, have been the first to be looked at by critical eyes for a larger portion of time. When video games were still considered niche entertainment, movies are leading the way in comparison to games in terms of addressing issues such as sexism and racism, at least on the surface. It used to be unheard of that we would get a film about a Disney princess who would work hard for what she wanted and teach the prince a lesson. *Snow White* (1937) was the first of the princesses and represented the ideal woman of the times: pretty, housewife material, and waiting gracefully for a prince to come save her.³ This trend has continued with other Disney classics, such as *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. However, when Disney movies got back to making princesses, their themes reflected the times; *The Princess and the Frog*, released in 2009, debuted its first African American princess, Tiana, and *Tangled*, a story about Rapunzel, is a princess that is also known for waiting for a prince, but Disney's computer-animated take on the story shows a more equal effort and desire to saving Rapunzel from her fate (unique for a Disney Princess movie) and Rapunzel and her love interest do not fall in love at first sight but bond over the course of the movie and then fall in love⁴. After *The Princess and the Frog*, there was an increase in positive outcry from social media, people talking about how young black girls were thrilled to see a princess like them on screen. Of course, one or two positive films does not mean racism and sexism have been resolved, but it shows signs of growth, especially in other entertainment media where representation to viewers is incredibly important. The trend has continued — *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* had Miles Morales, a young black teenager, as the protagonist, and the impact was just as positive and large for the many moviegoers and comic-readers.⁵ The response to such media has seen very positive feedback from movie-watchers, which is much more than many famous game titles have seen from the most vocal of game fans.

In the aspect of games, this negative portrayal and representation of women has been carried into the development of games. Game development companies have been predominantly dominated by men, with female designers, programmers, and producers only constituting to a small fragment of this blooming business. Because this industry is predominantly controlled by men, these men, driven by the incentive of money, further propagate these negative and sexualized representations of women. Female game characters perpetuate a stereotype of hypersexualization — bigger chests, tight waist, wider hips, and skimpy clothing. Women who play games have things assumed about them, such as the assumption that they are a “thot”, or a “titty streamer” using their cleavage to get more money, or that they are automatically worse at games in comparison to a man or a teenage boy. The *Mortal Kombat* design reflects a stereotypical portrayal of female ninja characters being designed to show more skin in

² “Mortal Kombat 11 confronts its past to show how far it’s come”. *Polygon* (April 2019)

<https://www.polygon.com/2019/4/23/18512496/mortal-kombat-11-character-design-story>

³ Hairianto D, “Representations of Females and Femininity in Disney Princess Films,” *Medium*, Medium, 12 Feb. 2014,

<https://medium.com/@hairyanto/representations-of-females-and-femininity-in-disney-princess-films-bfdc58c7d217>

⁴ Megan Batt and Suny Cortland, “How The Disney Princess Movies Went From Fairy Tales To Feminism,” *Study Breaks*, Study Breaks, 24 Apr. 2018, <https://studybreaks.com/tvfilm/disney-princess-movies/>.

⁵ Newby, Richard. “‘Into the Spider-Verse’ and the Importance of a Biracial Spider-Man.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Billboard-Hollywood Reporter Media Group, 17 May 2019,

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/why-spider-man-spider-verse-is-important-fans-color-1168367>

comparison to male character equivalents. In fact, studies have shown that playing games with overly sexualized characters have added to the normalization of sexual harassment with men having a greater likelihood to harass women after play.⁶ Moreover, female users also experience diminished self-worth and self-objectification where they become critical of themselves, their appearance, their lives, etc.⁷ This degrading behavior toward women has led them to become more fearful of participation in such a male-dominant community and choose to hide their identities rather than fight against ill-treatment.

Despite men traditionally being the vocal majority of gamers, in the Entertainment Software Association report of 2013, 55% of gamers were identified as male with the remaining 45% identifying as female. This important statistic signifies that women have just as much interest in video games as their male counterparts. It also brings to attention how poorly women are portrayed in video games. Many of them fall into the stereotype of “damsels in distress” or showcased “as objects of the male gaze: most women appear to be hardly older than 30, in most cases wear skin tight, figure-accenting clothing and are slim (Kondrat, 2015).” However, it is important to realize that this representation of women is not a problem exclusive to games. The problem actually lies further up the ladder and that entity is called “established social norms.” Video games are an entertainment industry that has overtaken television and cinema and has become one of the largest media outlets in the modern world. On the night of September 17th, 2013 Rockstar Games’ *Grand Theft Auto V* earned \$800 million USD on its first day of release and \$1 billion USD within the first three days. According to the Guinness World Records, it is the fastest selling work of entertainment media in history.⁸ Just like any industry, however, the money will always be a high incentive, the ultimate goal — and the best way to maximize profit is to appeal to the largest possible audience: men.

In April of 2019, *Mortal Kombat 11* was released to the public with an extensive change in character design that included new visual updates for the female characters.⁹ Devoted fans who were used to the older version of women fighting in sexy clothes did not appreciate such a change and criticized it. There was an eruption on social media calling the designs “ugly” and how the women “looked like men,” even though the changes were relatively minute; the designers gave them more clothes and updated their face structure to modern 3D rigging for better cutscene animations.¹⁰ On the other hand, some have pointed out that quite a few of the

⁶ Karen E. Dill, Brian P. Brown, Michael A. Collins, “Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44, no. 5 (Sept 2008): 1402-1408, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.06.002>; Mike Z. Yao, Chad Mahood, Daniel Linz, “Sexual Priming, Gender Stereotyping, and Likelihood to Sexually Harass: Examining the Cognitive Effects of Playing a Sexually-Explicit Video Game,” *Sex Roles* 62, no. 1-2 (Jan 2010): 77-88, <https://rdcu.be/bAO2P>.

⁷ Jesse Fox, Jeremy N. Bailenson, Liz Tricase, “The embodiment of sexualized virtual selves: The Proteus effect and experiences of self-objectification via avatars,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, no. 3 (May 2013): 930-938, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.12.027>.

⁸ Kevin Lynch, “Confirmed: Grand Theft Auto 5 Breaks 6 Sales World Records,” *Guinness World Records*, Guinness World Records, (2013), www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2013/10/confirmed-grand-theft-auto-breaks-six-sales-world-records-51900.

⁹ Jorge Arenas, “Mortal Kombat 11 Abandons Female Sex Appeal — Radically Changes Jade, Skarlet, and Sonya Character Designs,” *Bounding Into Comics*, (2019), <https://boundingintocomics.com/2019/02/15/mortal-kombat-11-abandons-female-sex-appeal-radically-changes-jade-skarlet-and-sonya-character-designs/>.

¹⁰ Billy D, “Netherrealm Confirms Mortal Kombat 11 Females Won’t Have Sexy Items, Were Purposefully De-Sexualized,” *One Angry Gamer*, (2019),

male characters have shirtless options, so even though going in a bikini into battle is not practical, as the developers have stated, then what about the men? But the issue is that the male characters do not look sexualized or are portrayed as eye candy, so that argument is shaky. Even though development, design, and the treatment of how women are depicted is slowly getting to a better state of equal treatment, the audience is much slower to accept it.

Angela Washko is one such artist who creates feminist games as a social commentary on the misrepresentation of women in games. One of her games, *The Game: The Game*, is a work that defies modern game standards. The Game takes on the genre of a dating simulator, a genre that can help people build skills for feeling more comfortable around the opposite sex. Her approach is from the perspective of a woman who is being hit on by creeps at the bar. *The Game: The Game* features mainly male characters who fancy themselves as pick-up artists. However, things quickly become disturbing and suspenseful as the player begins to feel nervous and uncomfortable as the eerie music turns scary and the men become more abusive and corrupt. It puts into perspective how scary it can be sometimes to be a woman and how men are not making things easier by seeing women as objects to be won instead of people. Seeing people as something less than people is traditionally the first step towards discrimination and disregard for human rights.¹¹

Furthermore, Angela Washko also discusses the uniquely sexist environment of the culture within the game *World of Warcraft*, one of the most successful massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). She states that some women desire to remain anonymous in order to not be found out and avoid sexism. This is not necessarily a good strategy for the long term. This only serves to let the male players continue to assume that there are no women playing the game and perpetuates the echo chamber of unawareness, blatant sexism, and dehumanization. When Washko decided to discuss feminist topics openly in chat within *World of Warcraft*, many disturbing and upsetting comments were said about her. She was told countless times to “go back to the kitchen and make sandwiches.” The others in chat were calling feminists, as a whole, communists, and man-haters, which is in and of itself such a misinformed statement that it comes off as a joke. All of this serves to show that male gamers are incredibly misinformed and the echo chamber that they exist in perpetuates feelings of fear in women gamers and a desire for secrecy as a temporary solution to the problem.

In addition, another example involves Ji Firepaw from *World of Warcraft*, an AI character within the game who engages in sexist dialogue.¹² The greeting of a male vs female is gender-specific; for the female character, the focus is on how beautiful she is rather than how strong. Ji Firepaw greets a female character with, “Hello, friend! You’re some kind of gorgeous, aren’t you? I bet you can’t keep the men off you! Join me! You and I are going to be good friends!” Here we can see how the focus of the female character is based on beauty. On the other hand, the greeting of a male character is, “Hello, friend! You’ve got a strong look to you! I bet you’re all the rage with the ladies! Join me! You and I are going to be good friends!” For the

<https://www.oneangrygamer.net/2019/03/netherrealm-confirms-mortal-kombat-11-females-wont-have-sexy-items-were-purposefully-de-sexualized/81034/>.

¹¹ Ronald E. Riggio, “The 5 Steps of Dehumanization: The psychology of racism and discrimination,” *Psychology Today* (Nov 8, 2018),

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201811/the-5-steps-dehumanization>

¹² Andrea Braithwaite, “‘Seriously, get out’: Feminists on the Forum and War(Craft) on Women,” *New Media & Society* 16, no. 5, (2014): <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813489503>.

male character, it is his strength that is being focused on. Even though this dialogue is brief and often overlooked, frequent interactions can indirectly influence a player whether he/she realizes it.

Games should not be limited to men but open to all who seek to enjoy the pleasure of virtual entertainment. One argument for pushing social norms towards a celebration of intersectionality was made by the group who call themselves the Xenofeminists.¹³ This group argues that, though typically it is women that are heard about being treated poorly and with fewer rights, people who do not fall into typical categories of gender and race are treated poorly as well. Their manifesto urges society towards a celebration of intersectionality and an appreciation of everybody. Feminism has always gone beyond simply fighting for women's rights. It has been about equal rights for everybody. There is a growing understanding of who everybody is: to include people who do not fall into the traditional gender and race categories. The problem is that society does not believe that women, as well as everybody else, deserve equal representation and inclusion.

Temporary solutions are not what this generation is about. We grew up being told that anything is possible as long as you fight for it. Feminism is about everybody, not just women. It is time for everyone to take a stand. Women need to be proud that they are gamers who refuse to submit to stereotypes and male gamers need to stand up for them. If people do nothing and remain anonymous then the echo chamber wins. Although it is impossible to completely ignore stereotyping, it is achievable to represent them in a light that is appealing to both genders. To expand Feminism in the game space, we must become feminist game developers, and feminist consumers. Feminist game developers must include protagonists who represent multiple spectrums of humanity in a positive light and do not appear hypersexualized. As feminist game consumers, we must support games that portray women and humanity in a way that has a strong, positive influence on society. As feminist stream consumers, we need to support women streamers for the content of their videos, not because they reinforce overt sexualization. As feminist, we need to remember that all people have an inherent value and fundamental worth that should not be forgotten in society or dictated by heteronormative stereotypes and gender roles.

¹³ Laboria Cuboniks, "Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation," GNU Public License.
<http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/#firstPage>.

Bibliography

- Arenas, Jorge. "Mortal Kombat 11 Abandons Female Sex Appeal — Radically Changes Jade, Skarlet, and Sonya Character Designs." *Bounding Into Comics*. (February 2019).
<https://boundingintocomics.com/2019/02/15/mortal-kombat-11-abandons-female-sex-app-eal-radically-changes-jade-skarlet-and-sonya-character-designs/>.
- Batt, Megan and Suny Cortland. "How The Disney Princess Movies Went From Fairy Tales To Feminism." *Study Breaks*, Study Breaks, 24 Apr. 2018,
<https://studybreaks.com/tvfilm/disney-princess-movies/>.
- Braithwaite, Andrea. "'Seriously, Get out': Feminists on the Forums and the War(Craft) on Women." *New Media & Society* 16, no. 5 (August 2014): 703–18.
doi:10.1177/1461444813489503. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813489503>.
- Cuboniks, Laboria. *Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation*. GNU Public License.
<http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/#firstPage>.
- D, Bill. "Netherrealm Confirms Mortal Kombat 11 Females Won't Have Sexy Items, Were Purposefully De-Sexualized." *One Angry Gamer*, (March 2019),
<https://www.oneangrygamer.net/2019/03/netherrealm-confirms-mortal-kombat-11-females-wont-have-sexy-items-were-purposefully-de-sexualized/81034/>.
- D., Hairianto. "Representations of Females and Femininity in Disney Princess Films." *Medium*, Medium, 12 Feb. 2014,
<https://medium.com/@hairyanto/representations-of-females-and-femininity-in-disney-princess-films-bfdc58c7d217>.
- "Didn't I warn you about serving me bad coffee? Outrageously sexist adverts from the 1950s when society believed a woman's place was firmly in the home." *Daily Mail* (December 2012).
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2254806/Didnt-I-warn-serving-bad-coffee-Outrageously-sexist-ads-1950s-shocking-domestic-scenes-subservient-women-carrying-domestic-duties-husbands.html>.
- Dill, Karen E., Brian P. Brown, Michael A. Collins. "Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44, no. 5 (September 2008): 1402-1408.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.06.002>.
- Fox, Jesse, and Bridget Potocki. "Lifetime Video Game Consumption, Interpersonal Aggression, Hostile Sexism, and Rape Myth Acceptance: A Cultivation Perspective." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 31, no. 10 (2016): 1912-931.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260515570747>.
- Fox, Jesse, Jeremy N. Bailenson, Liz Tricase. "The embodiment of sexualized virtual selves: The Proteus effect and experiences of self-objectification via avatars." *Computers in Human Behaviors* 29, no. 3 (May 2013): 930-938. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.12.027>.
- Fox, Jesse and Wai Yen Tang. "Sexism in Online Video Games: The Role of Conformity to Masculine Norms and Social Dominance Orientation." *Computers in Human Behavior* 33, no. C (2014): 314-20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.07.014>.
- Hyphen-Labs. *Hyphen-Labs: Interaction Studio*. Hyphen-Labs Inc.
<http://www.hyphen-labs.com/>.

- “Killing Us Softly 4 Advertising's Image of Women,” YouTube video, 44:59, “openedmieyez,” February 7, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnAY6S4_m5I&has_verified=1.
- Lynch, Kevin. “Confirmed: Grand Theft Auto 5 Breaks 6 Sales World Records.” *Guinness World Records*, Guinness World Records, 8 Oct. 2013, www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2013/10/confirmed-grand-theft-auto-breaks-six-sales-world-records-51900. 20 May 2019
- Mortal Kombat 11*. NetherRealm Studios, 2019. <https://www.mortalkombat.com/>.
- Newby, Richard. “‘Into the Spider-Verse’ and the Importance of a Biracial Spider-Man.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Billboard-Hollywood Reporter Media Group, 17 May 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/why-spider-man-spider-verse-is-important-fans-color-1168367>
- Riggio, Ronald E. “The 5 Steps of Dehumanization: The psychology of racism and discrimination.” *Psychology Today*, Nov 8, 2018. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201811/the-5-steps-dehumanization>
- Xeniya, Kondrat. “Gender and Video Games: How Is Female Gender Generally Represented in Various Genres of Video Games?” *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2015, pp. 171–193. 1 April 2019
- Washko, Angela. *Angela Washko*. Otherpeoplespixels. Accessed April 15, 2019. <https://angelawashko.com/home.html>.
- Yao, Mike Z., Chad Mahood, Daniel Linz. “Sexual Priming, Gender Stereotyping, and Likelihood to Sexually Harass: Examining the Cognitive Effects of Playing a Sexually-Explicit Video Game.” *Sex Roles* 62, no. 1-2 (January 2010): 77-88. <https://rdcu.be/bAO2P>.