

## **Gender Stereotyping in Video Games: How Male Gamers Fantasize About Women**

The content included on modern video games is often a source of concern among parents and scholars alike due to the gender and racial stereotypes that exist in them. While a number of studies have been conducted on the impact of violent content and how it influences a gamer's aggressive attitudes and behaviors, little research has gone into examining the stereotypical content included in video games. The purpose of this essay will be to focus on gender stereotypical content and how females are portrayed in video games. First, I will discuss what is perceived as one of the most controversial depictions of females in a video game setting. I will then correlate this character to additional references and cite research and female gamer frustrations created by these depictions. Finally, I will discuss the implications of stereotyping in video games and the possible social and psychological implications on gamers.

### **Defining Stereotype**

Stereotypes are mental "shorthands which help to convey ideas and images quickly and clearly" (Courtney & Whipple, 1983, p.205). It most typically generalizes a widely accepted or commonly referenced perception about personal attributes of another group, or rather in this instance, females (Ashmore & Boca, 1981).

Traditional media depicts gender stereotypes to an oftentimes offensive degree in the eyes of women. Mass media creates drastic comparisons between female and male character with women often filling the role of sex objects. Exposure to these distorted images can create a negative effect on a gamer's perception of women (Peng). As a result, women are perceived as subordinate and

dependent to men at the psychological level, reinforcing their depiction as nothing more than relationships or sexual conquests for male characters.

### **Gender Stereotypes in Video Games**

For the purposes of this study I will examine the artistic evolution of the character Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* video game series. This character is a source of much controversy simply due to the main character's stereotypical appearance as shown below.



The image shows the evolution of Lara Croft's appearance through each video game release.

Gaming has long been male dominate, which can be illustrated by the fact that less than four percent of games offer a female-only lead, whereas only 44 percent of games give the option between amle and female leads (Kuchera). Gender roles in society are generally exemplified by all forms of entertainment media, and video games are no different.

Females are altered to look like the characters above to simply make them "sexy," regardless of how disproportionate they may appear. Such stereotypes are quite apparent in countless other gaming franchises throughout the industry as illustrated on the following page.



The instances above demonstrate how longstanding this stereotype has existed, dating all the way back to the arcade-hit *Street Fighter* (image above on the right). For years, Lara Croft was used as the epitome of female sexual appeal with her generous curves and gravity-defying bosom, and among male gamers this was very much to the game's success.

However, female gamers are no longer an uncommon occurrence, making up more than 40 percent of today's gaming demographic (Merripen). Due to their sizeable makeup of the gaming audience, their protests are now something that can no longer be ignored. Gaming studio Eidos, the creators of *Tomb Raider*, was forced to change Lara Croft's appearance to make her physique less likely to put off female players. In the image on the previous page, the sixth "iteration" of Lara Croft, while technically the eighth game in the series, finally reduced her from a DD-size bust to a more modest C-cup, while also removing some of her more revealing outfits (Hopkins 2005). To nonchalantly explain the change, creator Toby Gard said, "Lara's been on a diet and she's definitely gone down a cup size, but she's still quite well proportioned."

The simple belief that she was well proportioned prior to the change illustrates the prevalence of female stereotyping in the art styles of games. And, surprisingly enough, not all of the individuals at gaming studios behind the decisions for these stereotypes are necessarily men. A senior designer of Cyberlore's *Playboy: The Mansion*, a woman pregnant with twins, had a lot to say on the depiction of women in gaming, though not quite to the side of the argument expected of a

woman. Brenda Brathwaite said, “If you’re going to depict a woman and, say, animate breasts, animate them properly. The breasts in the original Dark Alliance drove me nuts. If my breasts moved like that, I’d go to the doctor... or call an exorcist.”

This viewpoint ultimately supports setting apart females as sex objectives, using bodily proportions and scant clothing as indicators of sexuality.



### **The Appeals of Appearance**

The media’s focus on physical appearance ideals is psychologically tied with poor body image and self-destructive tendencies like pathogenic dieting practices (Thomsen et al. 2002).. The modern media ideal for feminine beauty can best be described as “curvaceously thin,” an attribute many men compare real women against.

Researchers identified two attributes as the key aspects for appropriate media depictions of video gaming

characters: respect and recognition (Signorielli & Bacue 1999). Recognition is dependent on the consistent representative appearance of a character, whereas respect is dependent on the avoidance of stereotypes. However, most modern video games do not meet either standard in their depiction of women.

At gaming conventions throughout the world, women are oftentimes paid to appear as “booth babes”—provocatively dressed and attractive women who represent game characters and

pose with convention attendees for photos (E3 Censorship 2006). This is to increase the attention given to a booth and also increase appeal of the game to gamers. The reasoning here is that if the women at the booth are an example of the women in the game, this will cause gamers to pick up the title and give it a try.

### **The Positive Role Model**

While there may be an inherent appeal in designing female characters as less stereotypical, it's not so easy to create an interesting character when they are average in appearance. In video gaming, aesthetics are quite important to gamers, especially where females are concerned. Gaming studios, like any other media type want to showcase visually-appealing characters.

However, it is quite possible to make female characters successful without highlighting their sex appeal. Several such cases exist which demonstrate how popular a game can be with a female protagonist without bringing up the issue of appearance. For example, you have Lightning (Final Fantasy 13, Alyx Vance (Half-Life 2), Kerrigan (StarCraft), and Trip (Enslaved). However, most noteworthy would be the characters of Samus Aran (see image to the left) from longstanding franchise *Metroid*. This female character hardly gets thought of as a member of the opposite sex simply from the fact she is always covered in a mechanical suit of armor that almost entirely masks her gender.





These are but a few examples of female characters who have overcome the gender stereotype of blatant sex objects in gaming.

### The Sameness of Gender

Video games are artistic reflections of cultural ideologies, which make it a worthwhile endeavor to consider how our culture is reflected in art (see image to the right). Regardless of how sexually women may be represented in a game, it is ultimately more of a question on whether game developers have any ethical responsibility to address any issues of gender stereotyping.

Promoting the sameness of men and women from a feminist standpoint doesn't work in the world of video gaming. This would suggest that men and women are not, biologically, all that different and that any gender roles attributed to men and women are cultural. The cultural ubiquity of gender roles suggests that there is an undeniable biological difference in the roles men and women assume. The fact that men and women alike often play different roles in cultures doesn't mean they're relegated only to those roles, nor that one role is superior to the other. It simply means that genders are biologically equipped to address different needs.

The acceptance of this simple fact shouldn't act as an endorsement of oppressing women, but rather an acceptance that men and women are different. Gender representation is indeed



important in any video game, but these representations should not fall victim to the unreasonable stereotypes commonly given to females. As stated previously, video games are artistic reflections of our own cultural ideologies. Culturally, media has embraced the exaggerated representations of both genders, not just females specifically. The only difference is that women are more culturally acceptable without so much clothing.

### **The Ethics of Stereotyping**

Artists are under no ethical obligation to accurately represent reality. Video games are works of fiction and as such always have the option of portraying women in less traditional roles so as to explore more complex themes of sexuality. Studying the visual representations of gender in popular media like video gaming is an important consideration. These depictions can be powerful weapons culturally as they can instill belief in those that see them. Their chief role is to excite the imagination. But does gender stereotyping accomplish this?

The power of still images such as those shown here represent and perpetuate cultures of gender stereotyping. What this means is such artistic works support gender inequality in the real world, due simply to the powerful encoding visual stimuli offers over verbal. Can gender stereotyping be overcome? Without the support of popular media and the majority of gamers, this likely won't be possible.

## References

- Ashmore, R. D., & Boca, F. K. (1981). *Conceptual approaches to stereotypes and stereotyping*. In D. L. Hamilton (Ed.), *Cognitive processes in stereotyping and intergroup behavior* (pp. 1-35). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Courtney, A. E., & Whipple, T. W. (1983). *Sex stereotyping in advertising*. Toronto: Lexington Books.
- E3 Censorship? (2006 January). Retrieved February 13, 2007 from [http://www.igda.org/sex/archives/2006/01/e3\\_censorship.html](http://www.igda.org/sex/archives/2006/01/e3_censorship.html).
- Hopkins, Nic & Sulaiman, Tosin. (2005). *Storm in a C-cup as Lara slims down and covers up*. The Times. <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/article1980050.ece>
- Kuchera, Ben. *Games with exclusively female heroes don't sell (because publishers don't support them)*. The Penny Arcade Report. <http://penny-arcade.com/report/editorial-article/games-with-female-heroes-dont-sell-because-publishers-dont-support-them>.
- Merripen, Clarinda. (2005). *Increasing the bottom line: Women's market share*. Game Developer.
- Peng, W., Liu, M., & Mou, Y. (in press). *Do aggressive people play violent computer games in a more aggressive way?* Individual difference and idiosyncratic game playing experience. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*.
- Signorielli, N., & Bacue, A. (1999). *Recognition and respect: A content analysis of prime-time television characters across three decades*. *Sex Roles*, 40, 527–544
- Thomsen, S. R., Weber, M. M., & Brown, L. B. (2002). *The relationship between reading beauty and fashion magazines and the use of pathogenic dieting methods among adolescent females*. *Adolescence*, 37(145), 1–18.