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QU 301
12/10/15

Its Not "Objectification" If It's In A Game

The 19th amendment took, in its entirety, 70 years before finally equalizing the right to vote for both men and women. In 1950, the birth of the first computer game would pave the way for video games for many years to come. These events on the surface have no connection to one another. Yet, eventually these events would cross paths and are now linked by one connection, the destruction of both sides. When video game started to become mainstream and were adopted by American culture, the need for its expansion was in high demand. Soon enough stories and images were needed to bring the video game into a new genre. This is now known as interactive video gaming. One story arc that's easy to mass-produce was the damsel in distress. As years went on, women started to move forward in society. However in the video game industry, they were moving back. Sexualization of women such as those in skimpy outfits, high-pitched voice, unimportant roles and unrealistic body sizes have started to become the only way to represent women in video games. Through objectification, the gaming industry has caused a psychological effect on how human beings should be viewing and treating women.

Male characters have dominated the majority of video games. Eugene F. Provenzo, a professor in the department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Miami, published a study of how gender is represented in video games. He focused on Nintendo, a popular gaming company, and used 47 of their games to count the female-to-male ratio. Out of the 124 characters, only 8% were women and out of those characters,

none were represented in a dominant position (Provenzo, 1991). This study was then replicated a few years later. Dietz took 33 games from Nintendo and the Genesis game-consoles. He found that 30% of the games had no women at all and out of those that did, only 36% of women were shown and 21% of those still playing the submissive role (Dietz, 1998). This problem, however, has only been increasing at a steady rate. A study conducted by Children Now showed that 73% of males in video games have had an increase in their dominance status while 50% of women only function as a bystander in a game. Not only that, but female characters in games have become more “hyper sexualized.” Their unrealistic small waists and their huge breasts, while wearing little to no clothing is being heavily emphasized in games (Children Now, 2001). 46% of females characters in teen-rated video games were shown having huge breasts, and 86% of female characters in games are shown wearing revealing clothing. Unlike male characters in video games where only 14% had revealing clothes on (Beasley & Standley, 2002). These weren’t the only studys done over the years. Starting from 1991 to 2015, the study was replicated 9 times and they each concluded the same patterns. Males in video games should be tough, fully clothed, and always be the main character. Females in video games should be submissive, have little to no clothes on, be very sexy, and have a little to no role at all.

An example of this can be seen in the game franchise The Legend of Zelda. In the game the player can only play, as the character Link who is a male. The problem with this is that even though the game is about Zelda the princess and her adventure, the player can only play her once for a few minutes in one game, even though there are 15 games out. Another problem with the franchise is the depiction of Zelda. She is seen as a vey

slender woman with a high-pitched voice, small waist, big bust, and wears an outfit that accentuates her figure. The only role that Zelda plays is the damsel in distress and even though her name is the title for the games, she plays a submissive role. In *The Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time*, the player would play as Link the main character. Towards the end of the game the player gets to finally meet Zelda the princess who has been captured. She is shown to the player with no background or major role/subplot to the game. In one scene when it was time to run out of a castle that was falling apart, Zelda had to be carried by Link due to her inability to run fast because she tripped and sprain her ankle. This tends to be a recurring theme in the Zelda game, where the player follows Link's adventure but saves Zelda that makes an appearance in a game that's supposed to be about her. This leads to many players' confusion of thinking that Zelda is Link before playing the game. In a poll conducted by the creators of the game, the question "Should future Zelda games allow you to play as a female protagonist?" was asked to the players to vote. The majority selected "No, Zelda games should always feature Link" (Zeldainformer.com). This shows just how undervalued female characters in video games are less important than men.

The target market for video games is normally for ages 8 and up, yet the human brain is fully developed by the age of 25, meaning that for many children that have been playing games since the age of 8 they have been watching female characters be "hyper sexualized" for a majority of their lives. This directly affects how males view women and how women view themselves. "Researchers have demonstrated that embodying in virtual world has a stronger effect on gamers than just passively watching a character" (Dockterman, 2013). This was made possible because of a phenomenon called Proteus

Effect, which is when an individual in an online game changes because of the visual characteristics of their avatar. Many people that play video games are subjected to a world that cannot change and have specific idealist views on gender. Seeing this for hours on end over a course of many years can drastically change someone's mind. This idea can be seen when someone plays games with customizable characters. Many gamers have come across a game or two where you can develop your own avatar. Research has shown that individuals with high-BMIs tend to create an avatar that has a drastic appearance in body size and attractiveness as well (Ducheneaut, 2009). Other research was conducted, taking 86 women from the ages 18 to 40 to play with either a sexualized or non-sexualized characters. When participants were asked to write about their thoughts, those with sexualized characters were more likely to self-objectify within their essays (Dockterman, 2013). Although the study was small, the findings are irrefutable: women tend to feel objectified when playing a sexualized character. This doesn't necessarily mean that sexualized characters directly impact the views of genders though. It's difficult to do that because there are other variables that affect gender. It's difficult to create an experiment that isolates the video game as having a direct impact of affecting men and women psychologically. Nonetheless, even though it cannot be proven, it doesn't mean it should be removed as one of the many causes of society viewing women as lesser than men.

The over sexualizing of women in games doesn't just impact the individual, it also impacts the global community. One of the games that are frequently played by a younger audience is Grand Theft Auto. This game is mainly male driven and women fall into two separate spectrums; one being old or average and the other being a hooker. In

the game, a player is able to kill female as well as male pedestrians. Backlash came from the game because of it gives someone the ability to beat a woman. Also within the game, the player is able to select whether or not he or she would like the prostitute to give them a blowjob for \$50, a half-and-half for \$70, or everything for \$100. After the player is done they can choose to beat and kill the prostitute to get the money back. Many YouTube videos have surfaced of players doing just that. Grand Theft Auto has been able to make it socially acceptable to kill a prostitute in a game and make it fun. It's able to remove the reality of an actual situation that shouldn't be taken lightly and it's able to even make it funny. Meanwhile, actual women that are prostitutes are killed in real life. That aspect isn't shown in the game. In the novel Half The Sky, many stories are told about how women are forced into prostitution and are killed because they are either abducted or their families don't have enough money to support themselves, so they sell their daughters. "Girls in much of the world from the time they are babies, often do as they are instructed, even when the instruction is to smile while being raped twenty times a day" (Kristof & WuDunn, pg. 47). The game is making light of a situation that should be taken seriously.

Instead of having games that can brutalize women, it's making sure that 'women stay in the same place'. Even when there is a game specially made for females they are geared towards cooking (Cooking Mama for Nintendo DS) or taking care of a baby (My Baby Girl: Nintendo DS, My Baby Boy: Nintendo DS, My Baby First Steps: Nintendo DS). Even when a game has a woman playing a dominant role, they are still hyper-sexualized. One example of this is Lara Croft, viewed in the gaming community as a strong female role model (Geekfeminism.wikia.com). However, Lara Croft wears a tight

tank top with very short shorts, has a small waist, big breast, and is very curvaceous shows how even when female character plays a dominate role they are still represented in a sexual way.

The gaming industry has in some ways abused many of the human rights that are stated in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Out of the 30 articles three are being violated, those articles are one, five, and 12. Article one states, “ All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (UN, 1948). The section in this article that is being violated is the “equal in dignity”. Males in video games have dignity; however, this cannot be said about female characters in games. How is it dignifying for women to be over sexualized? Why is it that main character roles are only played as males, only used to move a story along, whereas women of different cultures are only made using stereotypes? The term dignity can be used in the virtual world as well as the real world. This is because dignity can affect what other people see. Article five states, “ No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” (UN, 1948). The section of the article that is being abused is the “degrading treatment”, and it’s degrading treatment to only show women being sex objects in video games. Even the more dominant women like Lara Croft are still seen and treated as objects. It’s because the majority of the game causes it to be a degradation of women especially if people take away these ideas from the games. The final article being violated is article 12. The article states, “ No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such

interference or attacks” (UN, 1948). A women reputation is important; it’s the only thing that can bring them marriage, work, and family in many cultures. “ The risk to boys are minimal, since the girl’s parents never prosecute the rapist- that would aggravate the harm to their daughters reputation and would be resented in the community“ (Kristof & WuDunn, pg. 62). Yet in many of the games, they attack women’s honor and reputation and that can be seen as an attack against other women. To generalize all women to be a certain way even though they are much different than what the gaming spectrum is showing.

As a global citizen and a game design major, my role in this is a bit difficult to explain. In the beginning, I didn’t really pay much attention to the over-sexualization of women in video games. I was never truly bothered as much because I am a male and most video games cater to males so I’ve never felt attacked. Once I started to look more into this topic, I was shocked with the lack of change that the gaming industry has done with the sexualizing of women. Although few games have come out with a female lead, it still cannot compete with the amount of games that come out with female characters wearing little to no clothing. However, now that I’m aware of what’s happening, I cannot turn a blind eye to what has been going on for many years. GamerGate is a revolution to bring to light to how sexist games are, but also ways in which change can come to fix this dilemma. This, nevertheless, caused a great war between conservatives and progressives. Many women are speaking out and want to start change on how games are characterizing women. “ I have at my disposal a semi-automatic rifle, multiple pistols, and a collection of pipe bombs. She is going to die screaming like the craven little whore that she is if you let her come to USU... I will write my manifesto in her spilled blood, and you will all

bear witness to what feminist lies and poison have done to the men of America”

(Dockterman, 2014). This was an emailed letter written a man that didn't want Anita Sarkeesian to go to Utah State University to talk about anti-sexism in video games. This is how deep-rooted the problem is, even with the many people fighting back on how the game industry continuously undermines women and what others are doing to bring change. As a global citizen, I still have to try changing this problem. One thing that I am planning to do is create more games that are use females that aren't sexualized to show that good games can have women with major roles. I will also want to support this movement and try to educate people to understand why having these images in video games is a negative and shouldn't be continued.

Lastly, the relation between games and women are the same. In more ways than one, they are seeking to destroy each other instead of working together. It's easy to witness that the gaming world hasn't really been that fair towards women. Objectifying them, not willing to change, and changing others perception of women are not things that should be brushed off. Bringing change into the game industry is the only way that change can work. Instead of eradicating every game, it would be better to bring small changes and move it up a little at a time. This way people can grow accustomed to this idea of change, so that that there won't be reactions like GamerGate. The gaming world can change but it can only change when people are willing to fight for a change.

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