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### Cause and Effect of Gender-Based Discrimination Within Video Game Culture

Video games have come a long way since the creation of *Tennis for Two* by William Higinbotham in 1958. Ever since the proliferation of inexpensive computer hardware, video games have gone on to inspire a whole industry and captivate the minds of many enthusiasts. Despite setbacks such as the North American video game crash of 1983, which permanently crippled the industry, the medium has experienced exponential growth to rival that of the Internet. Today, gaming has diversified into many genres and has ceased to be a monolithic video construct; it is now more of a platform that facilitates further social interaction.

The demographics of video games have gone through dramatic changes over the decades. Gone are the days where the stereotypical gamer was embodied by a “mouth-breathing, socially inept, porn-obsessive” teen-aged male (MacCallum-Stewart 227). In fact, the average gamer is now more accurately characterized as being 37 years of age, playing for 12 years and as is either male or female, since there is only an eight percent gap between the genders (“Essential Facts” 2). However, even with these statistics, women still carry the burden of being underrepresented and discouraged from engaging in this medium altogether. If this were entirely inconsequential, it would have been written off as a trivial concern for only the parties involved. However, that is not the case, because much literature has been posited that explores the relationship between

gender and video games. More importantly, women's limited accessibility to this medium has wider ramifications than a cursory glance would suggest.

If we are truly intent on seeing an egalitarian society come to fruition, assuaging the gender discrepancy present within the culture of video games is a good start. The purpose of this dialogue is to sow the seeds for the notion that girls should not just be allowed to engage in recreational video gaming: they should be encouraged. The reason for this is two-fold. First, severely hindering individuals' access to a medium based on gender lines reinforces adherence to one's gender. This exacerbates gender discrepancy, a discrepancy that we should be working to mitigate. Second, playing video games has been shown to improve spatial performance, which would explain why such a small minority of women can be found within the category of science, technology, engineering, and math, or STEM fields (Cruea 45; Jennifer 25). These topics will be expanded later but first it is important to establish some working definitions.

The functional definition of a "girl" in this article is a cisgendered female — meaning she identifies with the gender with which society has associated her sex — and is less than 18 years of age. A woman is defined similarly, save for the age group of 18 and older. The reason for this qualification is that a non-cisgendered female may require a more nuanced approach because the circumstances that are involved in establishing such an identity demand proper scrutiny. Thus, one studying such a demographic may have to examine a prodigious amount of additional factors that one would never have to consider if they examined traditional gender roles. This narrative was not constructed with that in mind, and for that reason, discussion relating to transgendered individuals who identify with being a "girl" is outside of the scope of this dialogue. The definition of a female describes the biological sex of the person. Self-efficacy, in respect to video

games, signifies a person's perception of his or her own capacity to accomplish an arbitrary task. And finally, misogyny is defined as an expression of a discriminatory nature that intends to sideline females by virtue of their sex alone. For the sake of simplicity, the terms sexism and misogyny will be used interchangeably, with the slight distinction that misogyny is culturally imposed and sexism describes instances of these impositions.

There are some people who would suggest that the systematic exclusion of females is far from reality and that no such enterprise could be entertained in 2012 for long. Though it is very unlikely that there is a conscious and collectivized effort to discriminate against women within the scope of video games, the fragmented effort of different parties gives the illusion that there is a resistance — this is no less dramatic a conclusion. Because those who insist that video game culture retains the discriminatory vestiges it has accumulated over the years have waged such a compelling case, most women and girls have internalized the notion that they have no place excelling at video games (Jennifer 29). It is important to address the charge that women are following a policy of self-exclusion at no fault of the current state of affairs.

A phenomenon that further embroils the situation is a concept called "Third-Person Perception," which posits that "people perceive greater influence of mass media on others than on themselves" (Cruae 49). This leads to the interesting conclusion that women disapprove of sexist representations of females not entirely due to a personal distaste of the offending material, but because they worry of the consequences of such a one-dimensional portrayal of women on the attitudes of men. Their rejection of these images belies the assumption that an association to the material is tantamount to an endorsement, hence their self-exclusion in this particular context. However, this only covers why the content matter is involved in depressing the female

demographic. Actually playing video games is a completely new environment with its own perceived social hazards that discourage female interaction. Women have been very cautious when gauging their own self-efficacy in game-play. “Previous research confirms the finding that men’s self-efficacy in relation to video games, as well as other spatial skills, is often superior to women’s, which may be due to many reasons (experience, media messages, stereotype threat, etc.)” (Jennifer 29). Women have arrived at the conclusion that being proficient in game-play is unfeminine and thus, an unbecoming quality. The disenfranchisement does not stop there, however; women actually do possess lower self-efficacy because the amount of time that they have been playing usually pales in comparison to the amount of time that men have been playing (Jennifer 29).

Despite these findings, video games are not exactly the original inventors of sexism. Sexism in the media has had a long history and as a newcomer, video games happen to be the prime candidate for perpetuating this narrative. However, carrying over viewpoints from other forms of media does not seem likely, as one researcher explains: “Our theorizing comes from research done on traditional media, but we hesitate to replicate the same thinking and methods with them to video games” (Ratan 826). The reason for this is that this medium possesses certain advantages over previous media in the sense that it invites the user to interact. In fact, without the user, there would be no medium and with that respect, video games can definitively be considered a formidable platform for socialization. The most important factor that it has going for it is realism (Ratan 826).

Realism is described as the capacity for a medium to effectively emulate reality. In fact, “research on technological advancements in video games indicates that realism can impact the

user experience along several important dimensions such as physiological arousal, involvement, and aggressive thoughts” (Ratan 826). The crowning achievements that solidify this assertion are tests that were done to gauge the “effect of video game realism on players' sense of presence, involvement, physiological arousal (i.e., skin conductance), self-reported arousal, and affective and cognitive aggression in a 2 (video game content: violent/nonviolent) x2 (video game realism: recent/ older release date) factorial experiment.” The tests found that “players experienced more arousal when playing more a realistic or newer game than did those who played a less realistic or older video game” (Ratan 826). What this means is that engaging in video games not only engages us mentally but also through a whole slew of other dimensions. This explains why this medium not only has the power to captivate but also to repulse and to do so strongly. However, it is not strictly the video game itself that foments such loathing because of its sexist caricatures.

It is an interesting phenomenon that most of the sexist representations of women come not from the actual game content but from the advertisement used to endorse the game: “This portrayal of women is sometimes more associated with the marketing of the game than with the game itself” (Dickerman 23). Ironically, the Entertainment Software Rating Board, or the ESRB, while purporting to be the watchdog for possibly unsuitable material on electronic media, “promotes various representations of gender, [which] is most notable in television and movies” (Dickerman 22). This is why ads that feature individuals tightly adhering to their social roles are allowed: they are perpetuating notions that have existed before the advent of the video game era. Moreover, the ads for video games may at times blatantly advertise under mildly false pretenses in order to increase revenue. For example, “for a computer game called 'Neverwinter Nights’” (2002), the heading of the advertisement asks, 'Have you seen this girl?' and shows the image of a nearly naked woman, partially covered by seashells. Interestingly, this girl appears in the game

but is not presented there as nearly nude” (Dickerman 23). One cannot help but see this as a lightly veiled attempt to pander to a racy interest, one whose sole purpose is to get players, specifically male players, to purchase their game. This is supported by the fact that once the game is purchased, material with this kind of appeal is no longer present.

The problematic part is not, however, that the ads do not lend themselves to the video game content, but that such material is used at all. Another example in which this occurs is in the popular strategy game “Civilization IV.” In 2007, the “company producing the game recently ran a print advertisement for an add-on feature to the game. The ad features a busty version of the Statue of Liberty and the words 'CIV GOES BIG' despite the lack of anything overtly sexual in the playing of the game” (Dickerman 23). Thus, the presence of sexually themed content in video game advertisement does not belong to certain genres but can and is used extensively within different genres for the explicit purpose of marketing. This phenomenon somewhat resembles a feedback loop, in which marketing groups include racy content within their advertisement because it is commonplace; so far, there have not been many negative repercussions to this routine. In doing this, advertisers are enforcing this as a norm and making it more onerous to dismantle this culture of ads. One of the most visible examples of this is the ad campaign for the online multi-player game “Evony.” The marketing team for the game started producing a string of progressively racy ads featuring females in various forms of undress, all of which had nothing to do with the game whatsoever. It is this sort of depiction of women that illuminates the gender imbalance seen today.

Furthermore, the gap widens when we learn of the consequences of this gender disparity. Women, who can be classified or classify themselves as non-gamers, create a separate identity

for gamers. Creating this separate identity for gamers usually results in a “critical, negative perception of gaming” (Consalvo 569). The content of this judgment relies significantly on the popular conception of gaming that has been shown to present an inaccurate portrayal of the average gamer; it does not do today's gamers justice. It reinforces the differences that non-gamers associate with gamers, thus making it less likely that the non-gamer will engage in any kind of activity remotely reminiscent of gaming. Additionally, it has been shown that a rejection of gaming is connected to a personal espousal of one's gender role (Consalvo 569). That is to say, women who disregard video games as a “waste of time” do so from the vantage point offered to them as women. Because this activity is at such odds to the standard model of femininity, it is neither worth their time nor effort to entertain.

The persistence of male-dominated video games has great consequences for society as a whole. Video games can be considered training tools because they do such a competent job of exercising certain mental faculties. For example, “first-person shooter games modify basic functions such as target detection, spatial selective attention, spatial resolution, and processing speed. The player must detect the sudden appearance of potential threats at unpredictable locations in a complex visual environment, discriminate from foe, and take selective action, which is usually to shoot at threats. To avoid being killed in the game, these basic operations must be executed rapidly” (Marshman 1098). The effects of this spatial exercise improve the subject's ability to visualize three-dimensional objects and complete other such mental tasks. This, in essence, can explain why there are many more males in STEM-oriented occupations. The current increase in popularity of video games matches the decrease in the female population of STEM fields such as computer science: “In fact, many computer science departments reported that less than 10% of their undergraduates were women, and excessively violent and

unjustifiably sexist video games were often pinpointed as a culprit that drove girls out of the computer science fields” (Cruea). Men have greater accessibility to video games and thus, have the essential tools needed to ascertain the mental requirements demanded by such work. Thus, we arrive at the conclusion that males make up a large portion of STEM-oriented jobs because they have greater accessibility to the tools needed to exercise the required mental faculties. If we were to apply the same social climate that allows men to excel at video gaming to women, the latter would experience the same benefits. There is reason for this optimism because, in fact, it has been shown that “gender difference was virtually erased after training with a first-person shooter game” (Marshman 1099).

Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that players may be steering the course of video game design style. *Age of Conan*, a massive multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG) is a perfect example of the ramifications faced by players who play as free agents, able to collectively impose their will on offending content. This game provides a prime example of the sexualization of female avatars and how this “and the positioning of strongly polarized gender stereotypes was firmly rejected by players” (MacCallum-Stewart 28). The full name of the game is *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* and it was released in 2007. Like most RPGs, this game has a background story that would affect game-play and provide the exposition for in-game narratives. *Age of Conan* is unique in that it had “positioned female players as a barely tolerated minority from the outset,” which is at odds with the notion that “the gender of a player should not be something that is contradicted or oppressed within this framework” (MacCallum-Stewart 28). It was made rather ostensible that game-play experience would be axiomatically determined by gender. During the character customization screen, males are shackled to a boat while “women avatars emerge from behind silken curtains on its bridge; a thinly veiled (literally)



comment as to their slave's duties” (MacCallum-Stewart 28). The game continues much in the same fashion, solidifying the notion that women must be sexual beings in order to be seen as normal or to even exist.

A press release that was issued by one of the game’s developers proved to be unintentionally telling in terms of describing the psychology that leads to this extremity of gendered game-play. In response to this, a video game researcher insightfully summed up the public release with this analysis: “The emphasis on the idea that making female avatars equal is somehow a novelty, as well as the crude reference to 'nature's own armor' suggests that this press release is entirely aimed at a male player base and that women are only allowed in by grudging, even contested consensus, 'let the discussion start!'" (MacCallum-Stewart 229). Thus, we are left with the impression that women may participate in game-play only if they accept certain stipulations concerning their circumstances, which paradoxically, may significantly reduce the amount of pleasure they get from playing *Age of Conan* at all.

Due to the proximity of their releases, one can conclude that *Age of Conan* was “deliberately released during a lull in which industry leader *World of Warcraft* (WoW) was waiting for the game's second expansion, in order to entice players away. The harder, meaner atmosphere was intended to offset the bright, cartoonish world of *WoW*,” retrospectively, to no avail (MacCallum-Stewart 229). As sales for the game indicated, players were not moved by the game-play mechanics of *Age of Conan* and proceeded to drop the game completely after the free trial expired. In fact, the company that was delegated the responsibility of developing the game reported \$23.3 million in losses (MacCallum-Stewart 229). Much of this had to do with the atmosphere promulgated in hopes of enticing players in the first place. This led to two

detrimental consequences in-game.

First, the atmosphere was one that “endorsed aggressive behaviour within the game, including letting players feel that they could make derogatory sexual comments based on gender, even though this was strictly against the game's griefing policies” (MacCallum-Stewart 229). Thus, while proper policies were set in place to prevent sexual harassment, the gendered game-play encouraged such interaction. Second and much in line with the first point, social relations were very much strained by the atmosphere. Initial meetings were usually of a hostile nature, causing players to critically berate each other's performance (MacCallum-Stewart 229). This further exacerbated the tense relationship between males and females in-game. An example indicative of this strained communication comes from *The Final Chapter* guild, “who migrated to *AoC* [from *WoW*]. During this period a violent row broke out about the perceived sexism of the game, resulting in several people refusing to play *AoC*, and the guild's swift return (within the month preview period) to *World of Warcraft*, where the normative atmosphere of cooperation and sociality was swiftly reformed.” (MacCallum-Stewart 229) Despite the promising initial release of *Age of Conan*, interest in the game soon died as the atmosphere in which social relations were embroiled in came to light; gamers as a whole conclusively rejected it.

What this narrative divulges is that not only do video game players have the capacity to be the catalyst for change but also that they tend towards gaming communities that foster a culture that does not slight a large portion of the game-playing population. The most interesting part in this is that this conclusion was reached collectively rather than individually. That is, players' disillusionment with the game was a social phenomenon. The reason for this kind of classification is to accentuate the pattern in the psychology of gamers. If they prefer to engage in

game-play that is not biased toward one gender or even, more generally speaking, does not disenfranchise any portion of the population, then there is reason to be optimistic, indeed. This sort of behavior has the possibility of changing the course of the zeitgeist, altering what games become popular. This, in turn, demands proper reciprocation from game developers. Since most of them want high returns from their sales, they would do well to target genres and game mechanics that promise to do just that. *Age of Conan* failed in that respect because while its initial sales looked promising, it ultimately did not foster the kind of environment in-game that would entice the players to stay.

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