

“You Shoot Like A Girl!”: The Female Protagonist in Action-Adventure Video Games

Sara M. Grimes

School of Communication
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6 Canada
sara.grimes@angelfire.com

ABSTRACT

This paper was inspired by the popularity of female video game protagonists despite girls' and women's continued hesitance to participate in digital gaming activities. The pilot study examines how the imagery and narrative structure of popular, contemporary video games construct a paradigm of the ideal female heroine. An in-depth content analysis of three best-selling action-adventure video games was conducted. Key findings indicate the recurrence of a paradoxical interplay between beauty ideals and characterization, wherein the female protagonist must reconcile traditional ideals about beauty and body type with the decidedly untraditional gender roles and actions she engages in.

Keywords

Video games, gender roles, audience identification, representation, heroines.

INTRODUCTION

Ever gaining in popularity, video games have evolved from simple shooting and timed-reaction diversions into full-fledged “immersive” (or intensely involving) universes. In fact, popular video games often supply Hollywood with the plot lines and characters that fill some of today's most popular blockbuster hits. This is indicative of the increasingly comprehensive nature of the stories and settings present within game discourse, particularly within the action-adventure and RPG (role-playing game) genres. Consistently listed among the top-selling video games [7], the popularity and cinematic features of action and RPG games place them in a position that warrants content analysis, similar to media such as film and television.

There remains, however, an important distinction between motion pictures and narrative-centric video games, that of interactivity. Video games demand the continued, highly attentive involvement of the player. The audience becomes a part of the narrative, making decisions and controlling actions, yet subject to the unanticipated forces and events of the game environment that make up the “reality” of the gaming experience. Most RPG and action-adventure games present protagonist characters in the “third-person,” supplying players with an

*avatar*¹. Thus, in addition to a limited control over events and actions, players experience the game through a visual representation of themselves.

Identifying with the protagonist is an inevitable part of playing the game correctly. Examining the characteristics and image of these avatars is therefore essential to understanding the preferred readings and ideal subject positions that video games offer to audiences.

¹ Described by Berger [1] as “virtual constructs that are controlled by human players and function as a means of interacting with other people or characters”.

Traditionally perceived as a “boy’s toy,” the video game industry remains a medium that is dominated by primarily male interests. Not only do significantly more boys play console video games than girls [8], but male players also play more often, spending nearly 400% more time playing than female players [9]. In addition, the majority of video games seem to be designed with a male audience in mind, focusing on themes such as sports, war and competition. Nonetheless, recent research has also shown a steady increase in female gaming and the Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA) [8] maintains that 62% of new players² are female. These statistics suggest a growing interest in digital games among girls and women.

Concurrently, there has been a significant resurgence in female video game characters over the past ten years. According to Provenzo [11], as recently as 1991, only 8 percent of video games contained female characters (most commonly in the role of the “damsel in distress”). Today, however, a full 54% of lead characters in video games are female (*SexTV*, Nov. 10, 2001). Featuring female characters in protagonist and heroic roles, these video games seem to offer players of both genders the opportunity to identify with positive female role models. For the growing number of girl-players, these characters may provide an entry point to an otherwise highly male-dominated medium.

The purpose of this study is to answer the question: Do the imagery and narrative structure of popular, contemporary video games construct a paradigm (or pattern) of the ideal female heroine? This will be accomplished through the analysis of various aspects of action-adventure video games involving female protagonists, in which the following sub-questions will be addressed:

- 1) What roles and functions do the female characters fill? Do these support or challenge traditional notions of gender roles?
- 2) What beauty ideals are presented through the imagery of video games? Do these support or challenge traditional Western beauty ideals?
- 3) What actions and behaviours do female characters engage in?
- 4) What preferred subject positions are communicated by the gameplay and narrative structures (or plotlines)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The video game industry has quietly evolved into a full-fledged entertainment mass medium, generating approximately \$6.35 billion USD annually and attracting over 145 million players in the United States alone [8]. Accordingly, the medium has attracted increasing amounts of analysis and criticism. Public debate has focused primarily on instances of graphic violence, as well as the sexualized portrayal of female characters. Early research into the subject of gender and video games was somewhat limited to issues involving semiotic analysis (e.g. sign and signified) and lack of representation. More recently, a growing

² Defined as “people who have been playing [digital] games for less than a year” [8].

number of studies have approached the topic from a more comprehensive and experiential approach, extending their analysis to the language as well as the aesthetics of video game content. Among these, Children Now's [5] content analysis of console video games, Cassell and Jenkins' [3] examination of the gender assumptions behind game design and marketing, as well as Berger's [1] bio-psycho-social analysis of video game narratives and play experiences and Schleiner's [12] analysis of video game heroine Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider*) proved most pertinent to the current study.

This study specifically seeks to elaborate upon the work of Berger [1], who applied feminist film theories to his analysis of Lara Croft. It also attempts to extend the analysis to audiences of both genders. Berger's work included the application of Mulvey's concepts of scopophilia as well as John Berger's theories of the 'male gaze', both of which assume to some degree the presence of a predominantly male audience. Although the research shows that this is indeed the case with video game audiences, I intend to expand on this assumption in order to consider the minority female component as well. The possibility of trans-gendered identification, as proposed by Schleiner [12], also suggests a deeper complexity to the interaction between player and avatar.

The current study will therefore consider Althusser's concept of interpellation (and the ideal subject position), and discusses Doane's controversial theory on gendered spectatorial relationships [13]. Althusser's theories involve the ideologies inherent in media texts, which invite people to recognize themselves and identify with the subject. In doing so, media texts "designate the kind of viewer (the author) intend(s) us to be [13]." A study of interpellation allows us to discern the nature of the "ideal subject" constructed within specific texts, and therefore identify the preferred or dominant reading . Doane's suggestion that viewers identify with same-gender characters suggests problematic spectatorial relationships for both females who enjoy predominantly male texts, as well as males who adopt a 'female' subject position through their identification with female protagonists [13]. Doane's theories led to a heated debate on the possibility of cross-gendered identification, where "viewers readily deploy fantasy to occupy the "wrong" gender position in their spectatorial relationships [13]." Both positions of this debate will be considered, as the issue becomes even more complex when placed within the context of participatory or interactive media such as video games.

METHODOLOGY

The content analysis comprised of an in-depth look at three popular console games (released in 2002) that featured either a protagonist or a primary character who was female. The games were selected based on sales statistics and top-ten lists provided by a variety of sources,

³ A component of semiotics, as proposed by Stuart Hall [13].

including consumer research resources, trade magazines, fan sites, weblogs, and established forums. While this sample was in no way representative of the entire scope of digital games released in 2002, it did allow for an overview of how some of the most popular games portrayed female protagonists. The games selected were:

- 1) *Metroid Prime* (2002): Released by Retro Studios Inc. (USA) for the Nintendo Gamecube. The latest in a series (1986-2002), this game was rated T (Teen) and featured both first-person and third-person gameplay within an action/science fiction narrative.
- 2) *Resident Evil* (2002): Released by Capcom Entertainment Inc. (USA) for the Nintendo Gamecube. A remake of the first installment of the popular Resident Evil series (1994-2002), this third-person action-adventure game falls within the "survival horror" genre and was rated M (Mature).
- 3) *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002): Released by Silicon Knights (Canada) for the Nintendo Gamecube, this original epic horror, third-person game was also rated M (Mature).

The games were played in their entirety, a process that was carried out over a three-month period (December 2002 to March 2003). Total playing time required to complete each game ranged from 20 to 40 hours. Due to a high level of interactivity, which at times resulted in significant deviations within the narrative, two of the games (*Metroid Prime* and *Resident Evil*) required several replays in order to determine the full range of possible storylines available. Observations were recorded during or following gameplay and included notes on characters' appearance, actions and activities, interactions with other characters, general verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as any additional background information and character development provided.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1) What roles and functions do the female characters fill? Do these support or challenge traditional notions of gender roles?

Among the games reviewed, all three lead female characters filled the role of primary hero and avatar. All three acted as the player's mediator to the games' environments and narratives, presenting gameplay through their perspectives and visual representations. Each heroine was described as excelling in a profession that directly challenged traditional Western gender roles. The function each character performed within the larger narrative, however, differed significantly from one game to the next. While *Metroid Prime's* first-person perspective allowed Samus' character to completely dominate the player's experience of the gameplay and storyline, Alex's role in *Eternal Darkness* was somewhat less prominent. In *Resident Evil*, Jill alternated between the contrasting roles of heroine and victim. In each instance, elements of the narrative and interactions (or lack thereof) with other characters significantly influenced the protagonists' effectiveness as heroic characters.

Of the three protagonists studied, Samus Aran had the most dominant

role as well as the most straightforward. She was the focal point of every scene, drove every aspect of the gameplay and was often the only character present on the screen. Without character interactions, dialogue or an adequate quantity of facial or emotional expressions, however, Samus was restricted to the more technical function of avatar. In many ways, Samus was merely an empty vessel for the player to appropriate, acting as little more than a visual representation of the player's actions within the game environment.

Jill Valentine, on the other hand, had a number of distinguishing characteristics that not only put her at odds with the function of heroine, but also placed her at a disadvantage to the male characters around her. Jill's portrayal was highly reminiscent of Carol Clover's [4] "Final Girl". Jill was shown as a protagonist who must *endure* the action (in this case, violent zombie attacks), as opposed to Samus who compelled and directed. Easily harmed and with limited resources, Jill also spent a large portion of the gameplay in a weakened condition, running from enemies instead of fighting back. It is in this context that Jill's similarity to Clover's [4] "Final Girl" becomes most obvious. Despite her combat training and expertise, Jill is the perpetual victim. It is worth mentioning, however, that Chris (the optional male protagonist) though stronger than Jill, also filled this dual function of victim/victor. Though meaningful gender differences were observed when comparing Chris' and Jill's gameplay, the focus on survival and victimization remained a dominant feature in both versions of the game.

The most disturbing feature of Jill's gameplay was that she was frequently subordinate to the male characters around her. This was compounded by the fact that Jill was the only female in the group (other than Rebecca who appeared only in Chris' gameplay), accentuating her gender "difference." That Jill was the only female recalls Sherrie Inness' [6] notion that popular media reduce heroines' power by presenting them as the "exception" in otherwise male dominated genres. Jill was thus easily placed in situations that reinforced the stereotype that women are subject to men. She was regularly rescued by male companions, in addition to being the only character subjected to physical abuse at the hands of her teammates. The heroine thus portrayed the additional – and highly stereotypical – roles of damsel in distress and battered woman.

Conversely, in the game *Eternal Darkness*, it was the male characters who were most often shown subjected to violence and terror. Concurrently, male characters also drove the majority of the action and engaged in most of the combat and exploration. Consequently, the female protagonist (Alex) was often relegated to the passive role of witness. Although she remained the central character throughout – mediating each sub-plot and providing a coherent meta-narrative within which each sub-plot unfolded – her only real action sequence occurred in the final battle. Even then, Alex's function as protagonist was mitigated by the primacy of the male characters: she assumed their forms in order to vanquish the final enemy. The resulting interplay between

player, avatar(s) and protagonist(s) created a unique gameplay experience. It also complicated the female protagonist's function within the game by adding an extra layer of interpellation, a theme that will be discussed further in the section on subject role identification.

In accordance with previous research on female protagonists, two of the protagonists studied adhered at least partially to traditional gender roles. Through her positioning as a victim to be rescued and as a low-ranking officer to be commanded, Jill presented the weakest challenge to gender stereotypes. Her function as protagonist was repeatedly undermined by the actions and interactions she engaged in, recalling many of the same problems identified in action and horror cinema by past studies. Similarly, Alex's heroism was also oppressed by the game's male characters and her relationships to them. Whereas Jill was subjugated by the men around her, Alex was molded by them. Only the Samus character truly succeeded in presenting players with an unconstrained and untainted interpretation of the action heroine. On the other hand, Samus represented such a pure form of the interactive protagonist that any supplementary roles or functions were negated as a result.

2) What beauty ideals are presented through the imagery of video games? Do these support or challenge traditional Western beauty ideals?

In terms of visual representation, all three protagonists looked remarkably alike. Samus, Jill and Alex were each depicted as highly conforming to the beauty ideals found in the rest of the Western mass media: young and Caucasian, with beautiful, angular and symmetrical facial features. Only one character, Samus, ambiguously challenged Western conventions by hiding her body beneath a massive suit of armor. Jill and Alex, however, were both portrayed as thin and petite with slightly toned muscles. Although both women were also visibly curvaceous, Jill was the most overtly voluptuous. Highly evocative of Markula's [10] research on the "aerobicizing" of Western beauty ideals, the heroines' physiques seemed aesthetically "shaped" rather than genuinely reflective of athletic training. Jill especially appeared underdeveloped for her occupation and the physical prowess she was purported to possess. It seems unlikely that a real person with Jill's physical attributes, male or female, could complete regular police training let alone special forces training. This becomes even more obvious once Jill is compared to her male counterparts, who are all quite heavily muscled. In this respect, Alex's build is much less problematic. As a graduate student in advanced mathematics, she would not necessarily be expected to have an above-average physique or superior athletic abilities. As with Jill, however, Alex nonetheless embodies the same harmful beauty ideals that are found in the mainstream media.

In contrast, Samus offered an alternative, as well as highly gender neutral, representation of the modern heroine. Aside from the fact that the large majority of Samus' gameplay took place in the first-person perspective, Samus was only rarely visible from inside her spacesuit.

The suit itself was bulky and androgynous, with a wide glowing visor that often concealed Samus' face. Were it not for her clearly feminine facial features and the occasional vocal signal, players could easily mistake her for a male (a common misconception that was the root of the character's fame in the 1980s). Although this does not explicitly challenge beauty ideals, neither does it reinforce them. While it may be assumed that Samus' physique adheres to Western beauty ideals in the same way that her facial features do, this assumption is never confirmed.

One of the themes often raised in the literature was the issue of clothing. Previous research has shown that video game heroines are often depicted as scantily clad and therefore gratuitously sexualized [5]. Although none of the characters studied could be defined as "scantily clad", it is useful to consider each character's attire in the context within which the game unfolds. For Samus, the spacesuit was not only a weapon and a gender neutralizer, but necessary for survival in the toxic atmosphere of game's environment. Alex also seemed somewhat appropriately dressed for an unexpected midnight journey home. Her dark, fitted clothing was not revealing or skintight, and suited both the mood and the activities of the game. Jill, on the other hand, sported a provocatively close-fitting uniform and was the only member of her team without a bulletproof vest. Her attire accentuated both her thinness and voluptuousness, while creating an obvious inconsistency to the plotline.

Both Berger [1] and Inness [6] maintain that when priority is placed on a female character's physical appearance, through camera angles, revealing clothing or suggestive poses, she becomes "sexualized". Inness also puts forth the concept of the "pseudo-tough heroine". By placing continued emphasis on the heroine's sex appeal and feminine appearance (clothing, hair, etc.) she is made "less threatening" to the gender status quo [6]. Any challenge she might otherwise present to traditional gender roles is thus mediated by her partial – and contradictory – support of these same gender stereotypes. On the other hand, Tasker [14] warns that overly masculine heroines may be perceived as "men in drag", which also diminishes challenges to gender stereotypes. In addition, Calvert et al. [2] suggest that women are actually more likely to perceive a female protagonist as a role model if she is also physically attractive. These contrasting theories suggest that adherence to beauty ideals alone does not determine the overall effectiveness of action heroines.

3) What actions and behaviours do female characters engage in?

The gameplay of all three games was dominated by armed combat, exploration and problem solving activities. Each character was equipped with an arsenal of weaponry and tools, special knowledge and skills required to complete the game. In terms of the gameplay experience, one of the most prominent differences between Samus, Jill and Alex was in their varying levels of mastery of these tools and skills. Whereas Samus began the game with superior abilities and strength that

were merely amplified by weapon add-ons found along the way, Alex slowly acquired her powers and knowledge over the course of the entire game. The other key difference was in the emotions and behaviours (or lack thereof) that each character displayed.

Samus typified Tasker's [14] notion that action heroines operating within the conventions of a predominantly male genre tend to engage in traditionally male activities. In the role of intergalactic bounty hunter, Samus engaged in unlimited acts of violence and aggression. But while Tasker suggests that action heroines also emulate male behaviours, Samus provided no indication of either masculine or feminine attitudes. She exhibited little or no fear, self-doubt or surprise and never put forth an opinion or personal thought. Samus' most striking feature remains her lack of personality and emotional depth.

Conversely, Jill's excessive displays of emotion and traditionally "feminine" behaviours was what set her apart from the other characters in the game. Although every character in *Resident Evil* exhibited some degree of fear and stress, Jill's reactions were invariably more dramatic and out of control. Direct comparison between Jill's gameplay and Chris' showed that in almost every instance Jill showed weakness (either physical or emotional), Chris triumphed. Where Jill was rescued, Chris was the rescuer. Where Jill ran to her partner for help, Chris confronted the challenge on his own. The fact that Jill was physically weaker than her male counterparts only added to an overall image of vulnerability.

Unlike Jill, Alex was portrayed as composed and forceful. Without appearing impersonal and detached (like Samus), Alex retained control of her stress and fear. Alex was emotive but also quite stable: she exhibited courage and determinism in situations where her male counterparts lost control. Yet, she was also subjected to a number of gendered interactions, which were merely enhanced by the predominance of male characters in the game. As in *Resident Evil, Eternal Darkness* presented its female protagonist as a stark minority in a world otherwise comprised almost entirely of males.

Moreover, much of Alex's character development was defined by relationships with male characters. Alex's inner monologues revealed that the majority of her decisions were based on the desire to meet her grandfather's expectations. The threat of disappointing him is what motivated her heroism. Alex was also heavily influenced by the history of her predominantly male ancestors, whose stories brought her the skills and tools necessary to defeat the game. Within the context of Inness' [6] proposal that "transformation" storylines are used to devalue women's heroism (as a necessary adaptation to exceptional circumstances), it is clear that Alex's "transformation" from graduate student to demon hunter was a direct consequence of her male relatives' demands and guidance.

4) What preferred subject positions are communicated by the gameplay and narrative structures?

From the outset, each heroine's primary function as "avatar" established her prominence as the focus of the player's "ideal subject position". As both narrative and gameplay progressed, the player witnessed and experienced situations through the perspective of the protagonist character. Player "actions" were manifested on the screen as the avatar's actions, establishing an intimate link between that character and the player. From a film theories perspective, nowhere is this relationship more idealized than when playing in the first-person perspective. As avatars and protagonists, Alex and Jill offer players distinctly layered encounters with subjectivity and identification practices. However, it is Samus' gameplay that most effectively eliminates the barrier of "otherness" that can mitigate the players' successful adoption (or self-identification) of the avatar as the "ideal subject position".

In her analysis of male-dominated Hollywood cinema, Mulvey proposes that the camera represents the (male) viewer's voyeuristic gaze [13]. Within the context of video games, the first-person perspective thus correlates most completely to the player's own subjectivity. In regards to Samus, this relationship was presumably enhanced by the absence of distinct character traits or opinions that might have otherwise differentiated the avatar's personality from that of the player. The void left by Samus' lack of distinguishing characteristics can easily be filled by those of the player.

Samus challenged other aspects of Mulvey's theories, however, especially notions of the "male gaze" and the idea that the camera promotes a gendered mode of "looking." Even under the assumption that the majority of video game players are male, the fact remains that Samus' gaze was inarguably female. This reversal of the "male gaze" also conflicts with Doane's proposal that viewing "relationships" are gendered. Doane suggests that female viewers identify solely with female characters and can therefore only assume "female" viewing positions - mainly, the object of the male gaze [13]. As the subject of the gaze during most of the gameplay, Samus defied Doane's spectatorial conventions. Moreover, the only male involved was the potentially male player who must identify with Samus (and therefore adopt a "female gaze") in order to play the game. The question thus becomes, with very few visual or audio cues to reinforce the idea that Samus is female, could male players truly perceive their protagonist/avatar as a female character? Existing research on the topic, including the current study, offers little insight into the "audience interpretation" aspects of video game play and analysis.

It is in the third-person perspective (used in both Jill's and Alex's gameplay) that the ideal subject position becomes even more ambiguous. Unlike more passive media formats (such as film or television) where the audience is invited to identify with any number of characters, the interactivity of video games requires the player to associate directly with his/her visual representation (avatar) on the

screen. The protagonist manifests the actions programmed by the player, through a controller or keyboard, creating an ideal situation for player identification. Despite this relationship, Berger [1] states that when the avatar in question is a “beautiful” and “sexy” female, male players are more likely to engage in “scopophilia” than to self-identify with the protagonist. He proposes that the ideal subject position in this case is that of the objectifying male gaze. Schleiner [12], on the other hand, describes that all players (male and female) are interpellated to identify with avatars of both gender, enabling them to “experiment” with wearing a diversity of identities – including cross-gendered identities.

The idea of wearing and discarding various different identities was reflected again and again in *Eternal Darkness*. In many ways, Alex adopted and shed the identities of her male ancestors as she relived their histories (by reading the *Tome of Eternal Darkness*). The player was thus mediated (by Alex) in his/her own adoption of the male characters’ identities. Throughout the gameplay, the player was repeatedly reminded that Alex was the primary avatar. The ideal subject position shifted from the player and subject of the (potentially male) gaze, to the female protagonists’ own identification with a series of male sub-avatars. The play on subjectivities was both complex and significant – while offering a reflexive commentary on the nature of video game interpellation (the player assumes the identity of the avatar), the game also placed gendered spectatorial relationships at the forefront by filtering the identity shifts through Alex’s female gaze. Whether or not the game succeeded in maintaining a relationship between Alex and the player, however, is not certain. The player’s subject position could also completely shift with each transformation.

Although Jill offered a more straightforward version of the third-person avatar, she was also a highly problematic character. Various aspects of her gameplay recreated “Final Girl”-like scenarios of victimization, a concept that is also heavily linked to the “male gaze.” Jill was the most visibly sexualized protagonist of the three studied, as well as the weakest. Her vulnerability and limited physical power placed her at a stark disadvantage to the male characters in the game – including the alternative (male) protagonist. Althusser’s concept of interpellation requires that viewers “recognize themselves and identify” with the ideal subject position in order to assume it [13]. It seems unlikely, though not impossible, that the preferred subject position in *Resident Evil* is to self-identify with Jill’s character. It is in this context that the “male gaze” theory seems most applicable, without ruling out the possibility that female players gain as much satisfaction from this spectatorial position as male players do. On the other hand, Jill’s gameplay may present female and male players alike with the opportunity to overcome adversities and personal limitations. This challenge in itself may be just as satisfying as experiencing power and invincibility in other games. The analysis is once again limited by the absence of audience research, as it is impossible to adequately discuss uses and gratifications theory without audience feedback.

Although many features of video game narrative and content have proven comparable to those found in more traditional media forms, it remains a highly divergent form of audience experience. The interactivity of video games introduces a new dimension to the issues of interpellation and identification, while the player/avatar dynamic overtly challenges existing theories about spectatorial relationships. Without more concrete research into the audience interpretation and experience of avatars, gendered identification and interpellation, it is impossible to offer a definitive response or conclusions for this sub-question.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A recurrent theme throughout much of this study has been the potential interplay between beauty ideals (aesthetic) and characterization (narrative), as well as how this exchange might influence the overall effectiveness of female action protagonists. In action-adventure video games, the female protagonist must reconcile traditional ideals about beauty and body type with the decidedly untraditional gender roles and actions she engages in. This is especially problematic when the heroine is placed in a role that demands great athleticism and physical strength. Without the musculature and size necessary to realistically perform the actions they are shown accomplishing, ultra-thin action heroines lack the authenticity required to transform them into credible and effective role models. Many of the researchers reviewed maintain that the action heroine's unique mix of stereotypically feminine traits and masculine behaviours creates an irreconcilable paradox. Tasker's [14] theory that overly-masculine heroines lose their female identity necessitates that the female protagonist's femininity be reasserted in some way. It would seem that the use of visual and vocal cues is an easily-recognizable and efficient means of confirming the heroine's "femaleness". On the other hand, female protagonists that are perceived as overly feminine are also potentially less effective as heroes. Even within new media formats, traditional gender ideals continue to place barriers on the representation of women in popular culture.

From the results of the content analysis, however, it is clear that although all three heroines contribute to potentially harmful Western beauty ideals they are not all presented as "sexualized". Additional factors, such as clothing, camera angles and character interactions impact heavily upon the way each character is portrayed. The past literature presents conflicting accounts as to the actual impact adherence to traditional beauty ideals has on otherwise nontraditional heroines. While a "physical attractive" heroine is more likely to be perceived as an effective role model [2], a "sexualized" heroine is instead perceived as a "sexual object" [1].

It is important to note, moreover, that the literature often equates "beauty ideals" with "sexualization" and "femininity" with "appearance." These generalizations which may in part explain the contradictory results put forth by previous research. The current study demonstrates how narrative features and gameplay can create entirely

different results from aesthetically equivalent protagonists. This indicates the need for future research to specify and reexamine the categories used to define gendered media portrayals, as well more generally accepted concepts of femininity and masculinity. It is by breaking down these assumptions about gender, beauty and appropriate role models that the effectiveness and influence of female (and male) action protagonists will finally become clear.

Based on the three games studied herein, an emerging pattern of the ideal female protagonist is clearly identifiable. The action heroine adheres to Western beauty ideals: Caucasian and thin, with symmetrical facial features. She also concurs with Markula's [10] proposal that contemporary body ideals are "aerobicized", with slight, yet toned, musculature on the arms and legs. The ideal action heroine occupies a profession traditionally perceived as male. This further identifies her as intelligent, determined and tough. She uses weapons – usually a gun – and engages in acts of violence and aggression.

A deeper analysis of the findings also reveals a possible correlation between visual/physical appearance and gender stereotypes within the narrative. The more sexualized the character is visually (i.e., physical appearance), the more her character adheres to and is submitted to stereotypical notions about gender roles and ideals. At one end of the spectrum is Samus, completely encased in body-armor and almost entirely free of gender stereotypes, while at the other end we find Jill, whose exaggerated physical attributes and sexuality coincide with instances of male dominance and male physical abuse.

CONCLUSION

Despite the discovery of a number of promising findings, the current study remains limited by a number of factors. These factors include elements of the research design and methodology, as well as a failure to adequately apply all the proposed theories to the discussion. The most obvious obstacle to the study's reliability was its limited scope. Although a cross-comparison of three games was sufficient for the purposes of a pilot study, it is impossible to establish the presence of a paradigm based on only three samples. The limited number of texts examined also resulted in a diminished diversity in terms of content and gameplay options included in the assessment. Although the range of possible narrative elements was initially restricted to the "action-adventure" genre, a number of variations on the genre were further eliminated through the selection process.

From the content analysis and ensuing discussion, it became clear that existing film studies research on the topic of audience interpellation is inadequate when applied to the highly interactive medium of video games. This indicates that additional audience research into the themes of subjectivity and gaming is required in order to successfully explore the player/avatar dynamic. The findings also reveal the necessity to expand the scope of the research to include a much larger diversity of genres and subject matter. It would be worthwhile to extend the

analysis to include male protagonists as well. Many of the most significant findings surfaced through direct comparisons between male and female characters. This phenomenon suggests that problematic gender representations are not exclusive to female characters and identifies a need for analysis to include male characters in the study of gender portrayals. The examination and comparison of specifically targeted games (for example, those featuring popular girl culture icons such as Barbie or the Powerpuff Girls), would also yield a more holistic assessment of video game discourse.

If future research confirms the correlation identified in the current study, it could lend support to the argument that sexualized images of women in the media are harmful and sexist. Current ratings systems for video games are complex and commonly misunderstood, as they do not adequately protect against the sexualization of female characters or misogynistic content. If ratings systems were more reflective of the full-breadth of negative images and scenarios found in video games, parents and players alike could make more informed decisions about their product purchases before exposure to potentially harmful content. Research that supports attempts to redefine gender roles and ideals could also lead to the increased development of games featuring female and male protagonists in untraditional and empowering roles.

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