

**MISOGYNY IN VIRTUAL SPACE: EXPLORING REPRESENTATIONS OF
WOMEN IN POPULAR VIDEO GAMES**

**by
Nicholas Johnson**

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**Thesis Committee:
Dr. Jackie Eller, Chair
Dr. Angela Mertig
Dr. Meredith Dye**

ABSTRACT

The video game industry is a growing multi-billion dollar enterprise that reaches into the homes and lives of 72% of households in the United States. Recent feminist and scholarly critique of the market has revealed inherent sexism and misogyny as a common occurrence in video games. This study is a content analysis of video game trailers and reviews measuring and discussing the ratio of representative characters of men and women and the varying degree of sexualization between the two groups. This study finds that while the inclusion of women in games is increasing, women are still disproportionately absent in games relative to men; and despite being depicted more frequently than previously studied, women continue to be disproportionately sexualized and given inappropriate attire in their role as hero or protagonist.

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INTRODUCTION

The video game industry is a growing multi-billion dollar enterprise that reaches into the homes and lives of 72% of households in the United States (Puri and Pugliese 2012). *Pew Internet and American Life Project* reported that, “Grand Theft Auto IV grossed \$500 million in its first week of release, more than twice the largest domestic movie premier to date” (Lenhart et al. 2008:1). The industry generated over 20 billion dollars in 2012 alone (ESA 2014). Booming markets such as this attract attention. Over the past few decades video games have come under increasing scrutiny as the market has become more visible which has, in turn, created greater media attention. Largely, the focus of this attention has been on the aggression and violence depicted in popular video games.

With the introduction of games such as Grand Theft Auto into the mainstream media, critics’ focus begins to turn also to the inherent misogyny and sexism in popular gaming culture. The last few years have been especially critical of these elements as grassroots movements and activists have sprung up both from within and outside of the gaming community intending to challenge the representation of women in video games. In their 2013 exposé titled, “Tipping Points: Marginality, Misogyny and Videogames,” Jenson and De Castell describe several key events and players in this feminist response to the video gaming industry. Notably, they discuss two websites dedicated to collecting personal experiences of female gamers and two activists who struggled with backlash from speaking out against the misogynist trends in video gaming (Jenson and De Castell 2013).

Anita Sarkeesian is one of the aforementioned activists. Sarkeesian (2012) came to fame when she began a fundraising project on kickstarter.com to commit to a project which looks at the stereotypes, tropes, and overall misogynist messages that are delivered via video gaming. What started as a word of mouth project to raise \$6,000 became an international news story with over 2,000 supporters giving over \$120,000 to Sarkeesian's vision. But with this critique came backlash. The backlash began right away with internet trolls delivering everything from simple name calling to death threats (Watercutter 2012). Despite the backlash, she helped usher in a new wave of activists, gamers, and scholars to help take up the long overdue cause of applying a critical feminist lens to this phenomenon.

It is with this understanding of video games and the current atmosphere of feminist critique that I enter into my own analysis and discussion of the state of video games today and its portrayal of women. I will begin by examining current literature on gender in video games to establish relevant themes and discuss the potential significance of findings. I then conduct a content analysis of top selling games to address the themes established by this growing feminist critique and contribute to the growing body of literature whose focus is on maintaining a critical feminist analysis of video games.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned above, the bulk of video game research as scholarly pursuit has largely been couched in analyses of violence and aggression present in games and their potential effect on consumers. However, there is a growing line of inquiry into the gendered presentations and representation in video games. Themes that seem to be

recurring in the literature reviewed are the underrepresentation of women and the subsequent over representation of white men (e.g. Beasley and Standley 2002; Burgess, Stermer and Burgess 2007; Jansz and Martis 2007), the sexualized depictions of women (e.g. Dill and Thill 2007; Downs and Smith 2010; Miller and Summers 2007), and what effect video games and this gendered presentation of characters specifically have on consumers (e.g. Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009; Dill, Brown and Collins 2008). I will discuss these essential categories below and end with a discussion of two projects which I attempt to replicate elements of. to add to the existing literature and strengthen the growing critique and discussion of oppressive gendered messages in video games.

All studies I found whose data could be used to measure the male to female ratio of characters in video games indicate a significant skew in the numbers of men and women in games, with women being underrepresented every time (Beasley and Standley 2002; Burgess, Stermer and Burgess 2007; Dill and Thill 2007; Downs and Smith 2010; Ivory 2006; Miller and Summers 2007; Williams et al. 2009). Downs' and Smith's (2009) study found that females made up approximately 16% of the overall characters identified. The largest study found, which included capturing information on over 8,500 characters in video games, indicated that 14.7% of characters recorded were portrayed as female (Williams et al. 2009). This consistent theme is one of the largest and most obvious indicators of a bias towards maleness and masculinity in video games. It also places the proportion of women in what researcher Rosabeth Moss Kanter calls a skewed group (1977). Individuals within skewed groups are "often treated as representatives of their category, as symbols rather than individuals" (1977: 208). This theoretical approach to understanding the situation shows the significance of how women are portrayed in

video games. Women in video games become, to some degree, representative of how the audience perceives that group generally. In other words, the way that this token group is presented to the audience matters.

Researchers consistently find that women's depictions in video games are more sexualized than men's, appearing more often as scantily clad (Beasley and Standley 2002, Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess 2007, Dill and Thill 2007, Downs and Smith 2010, Ivory 2006, Jansz and Martis 2007, Miller and Summers 2007). This is especially troubling considering the already low rates of female characters. The tendency to see those in underrepresented groups as symbols of those groups and not as individuals indicates support for the idea that these depictions have a lasting effect on those who engage them (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009, Dill, Brown and Collins 2008, Jenson and De Castell 2013).

Several experimental studies show some directly observable effects of sexualized depictions of women in video games. Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009) isolated the effect of sexualized female characters in games on attitudes towards gender stereotyping and women's self-efficacy. Their study exposed 328 undergraduate students to sexualized depictions of women in gameplay and then surveyed them to assess attitudes towards self-efficacy and gender. They found that their "data cautiously indicate that gender portrayals in video games can, in fact, affect people's beliefs about women in the real world, and women's self-efficacy" (2009:819). While this study may be limited it, at the very least, shows some negative observable effect that can be found directly from the overtly sexualized and hyper feminized portrayal that seems to be recurring in video game design.

Using students in introductory psychology courses from a private university, Dill, Brown, and Collins (2008) conducted an experimental study of the effect of exposure to sex-stereotypes in female video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment. The results are insightful because they show both the expected negative consequence and an indication of change for the future. Men were negatively impacted by the exposure, increasing their tolerance of sexual harassment after being exposed. Women, however, showed *decreased* tolerance of harassment after the same exposure. The authors indicated that, “Taken together then, media images of demeaned women cause men to advocate keeping women ‘in their place,’ while they cause women to advocate for social justice” (Dill et al. 2008:1406). These studies help illustrate why it is important to continue this line of inquiry, and why, perhaps there has been such a crescendo of feminist voices speaking on the matter in the media and virtual social spaces.

Downs and Smith conducted research on the appearance of video game characters via content analysis of 60 top-rated games (2010). Their findings support the previous themes of underrepresentation of women, and a significantly higher depiction of women as sexualized. They also looked for hyper masculine depictions of male characters in this study and find that while unrealistic depictions of men existed, they were not significant. Ultimately they constructed eight variables coded for each character that were used to establish “overt sexuality” and “objectification” (725). Variables included: sexually revealing clothing, nudity, body proportion, sex talk, sexual behavior, appropriateness of attire, breast size, and waist size.

Finally, I turn to Ivory’s (2006) study which uses video game reviews from a top rated video gaming website GameSpot.com. Ivory selected the most popular games

according to the website and uses the official site review to gather data. Using the reviews, Ivory searches for support for several hypothesis including the expectation to find more male than female characters, and that the female will more often be sexualized. Ivory concludes from the reviews written for GameSpot.com that men *are* over represented in games. Ivory also finds that while the reviews themselves do not refer to women in a sexual manner (N=5) more often than men (N=1), the pictures used in the review pages *do* show a significant difference in portrayal of men and women (2006:110).

Ivory also posited a research question concerning the attitudes of the reviewers, and how they “regard the prevalence and sexually suggestive representations of male and female video game characters” (2006:107). In discussing this, Ivory stated that there is “some anecdotal support in reviews suggesting reviewers’ disapproval of sexualized female portrayals,” (2006:111). However, Ivory cites only one example, yet alludes to others possibly existing. A more thorough discussion of these findings would benefit not only the ongoing analysis of gender in video games, but also the usefulness in using this relatively new method of analysis (using reviews).

One could try to argue that perhaps the over representation of men in video games could likely be in direct correlation to the proportion of men over women who play games. In their introductory chapter of “From Barbie to Mortal Combat,” Cassell and Jenkins (1998) discuss computer games and general computer usage and ultimately find that in the literature at the time that girls were, relative to men, infrequent users of computers and all technology. However, a recent study indicates an obvious shift has occurred and now the proportion is much closer to that of the general population. The

Entertainment Software Association found that “forty-five percent of all game players are women” (2014). The ESA’s findings only five years earlier were reported in Behm-Morawitz’ and Mastro’s (2009) study at forty percent. This reveals an approximate shift of about one percent a year over the five year interval between reports in the percent of female game players. Therefore, we can clearly see that women have increasingly made up a significant portion of video game consumption. This begs the question of why this misogyny persists.

METHODOLOGY

For this project, I conduct a content analysis of video games exploring the ways in which gender is being expressed for men and women. This is done in two parts. The first part establishes viable video game trailers for top selling games to be analyzed via data collection regarding the depiction of the characters that are portrayed in the videos. The most popular unit of analysis in most research discussed above has been short (20-30 minute) recorded game play segments. This is problematic because many games take far longer to experience the entire plot and cast of characters available. Supported by other research (Janz and Martis 2007), the intention in using video trailers is to get maximum exposure to the characters in the game without having to employ additional researchers, depend on player volunteer experience, or use more complex and time consuming methods of recording game play. I am primarily focused on replicating the findings of Downs and Smith (2010), and therefore adopt variables in coding below. Since this 2010 study was done, the composition of female gamers, as I have discussed, has been on the rise.

Second, following Ivory's (2006) study, I reference game reviews from a centralized source for two reasons: for further confirmation of the data collected on characters portrayed in the video trailers (to confirm names, roles, race and age when possible), and to attempt to replicate qualitative aspects of Ivory's study but also move beyond it by expanding discussion based on qualitative observation and analysis. Game reviews offer a concise accounting of the characters and plot in the games reviewed, therefore offering a benefit over the use of in game play segments or still advertisements (e.g., magazine advertisements, game covers, or posters). An estimated 36% of teen gamers use online gaming resources frequently (Lenhart et al. 2008). In focusing my analysis on these themes of underrepresentation and misogynistic treatment of women that have emerged through review of the literature I intend to add to the ongoing dialogue about this phenomenon that is part of so many youths lives.

I employ relatively new strategies such as using video trailers and online game reviews for the same reason, and they both seem to be promising ways of exploring video games. As Ivory states, "Video game reviewers are video game players, and if they are not typical, then perhaps their role as opinion leaders is all the more valuable." (2006:106). I expect that by taking this approach not only will I replicate the findings discussed here but discover new themes and develop new discussion about these themes and about the strengths and weakness of these methods. Therefore, I did not limit the analysis of this study to the themes and variables of the replicated studies, but, particularly in the game reviews, I search for more observations to be made and themes to emerge.

Before describing my detailed methodological approach, I want to provide some background on my own involvement in the phenomenon and motivations for research. I am something of an insider in the crowd of video game consumers. My own experience of video games assists me in this study by providing useful insight and background knowledge of some characters and gendered components I discuss. Through general knowledge of video game culture as well as personal connections inside the video game development industry I became interested in a critical analysis of this phenomenon through my years of study as a student of sociology and women's and gender studies.

In keeping with what I believe to be a uniquely feminist approach to social research I hold a critical lens to this issue and intend this study to inform an ongoing feminist dialogue about the nature of video games and to what extent they are contributing to cultural beliefs and attitudes that perpetuate misogyny and gender stereotypes. I know these instances of overt sexualization and gender stereotypes of all kinds exist because I have always been an active video game player. It was through following the stories of activists like Anita Sarkeesian that inspired me to conduct this research.

I believe this research is highly important. I believe this research is in line with a distinctly feminist form of emancipatory research, not in the relationship between researcher and the research subject, but in the ultimate goal of exposing, dissecting, and challenging relations of power in society that, are here, manifest in the media we consume.

Part 1

Using a third party website which reports the top selling games of every week (<http://www.vgchartz.com/weekly/41644/Global/>) game titles were gathered from this listing starting at the beginning of 2014 and continuing forward until all reports available for 2014 were exhausted. A total of 23 games were identified as both top selling and fitting the criteria set forth. Going in order of sales position, each game was considered for inclusion based on several criteria. First, the game must have depictions of humans, or human like characters who demonstrate a non-ambiguous gender. They must contain primary or playable characters in the game. For this reason games like Tetris, Monopoly, and car racing games were excluded. While the trailers and even game content from games that will be excluded may have some depictions of human characters, I chose to focus on games whose central play style depends on being or interacting with other people. Games must also have available reviews on Gamespot.com, chosen for its popularity and status as an authority in online video game resources (Ivory 2006).

Using online resources, I located and evaluated the launch trailers for each game (approx. 60-180 seconds each). I collected data on every individual character presented in the video that meets my criteria for selection; known or depicted ties to main characters, significance to character or plot, and clearly definable features for analysis purposes. One aspect of Downs' and Smith's research omitted here is the console on which the game is issued (e.g., WiiU, Playstation 4, XboxOne). This variable is problematic as it omits computer games and handheld gaming devices, and may not account for some games being released cross-platform after initial launch. Therefore it will be left out of this analysis. The specific fourteen data variables, including descriptions, can be found in the

following Table 1. A complete list of games including trailer and review information can be found as Game Reference List attached as an appendix.

Table 1. List of Variables and Descriptions (cont. on next page)

Variable	Possible Codes	Description
Character	[Based on Name of Character]*	The name of the character.
Game	[Based on Title of Game]	The title of the game the character is in.
ESRB Rating	Early Childhood, Everyone, Everyone 10+, Teen, Mature, Adults Only, Rating Pending, Unrated	Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating is a “non-profit, self-regulatory body that assigns ratings for video games and apps so parents can make informed choices. The ESRB rating system encompasses guidance about age-appropriateness, content, and interactive elements.” (ESRB.org).
Gender	Male or Female	Only human characters with identifiable sex will be included.
Apparent Race	White, Black, Latino/a, Asian, other	Based on contextual clues, game reviewer data and apparent racial features.
Apparent Age	Child, Young Adult, Adult, Elderly	Based on contextual clues, game reviewer data and apparent signifiers of age group.
Role	Main, Antagonist, Secondary	These categories are reflective of other studies discussed above, they indicate the Main (playable) characters and the villains, as well as other characters involved.
Sexually Revealing Clothing	Yes or No	“any garment that was worn in order to enhance, exaggerate, call attention to, or accentuate the curves or angles of any part of the body (from the neck to above the knee) and which, by design, would arouse interest of physical intimacy from others”***
Nudity	None, Partial, Full, Not Applicable, Cannot Tell	“Nudity referred to the amount of exposed skin a character displayed. The levels were none (i.e., body was covered in such a way that there was no visible skin from the knees to the neckline about the shoulders as by an unaltered crew-neck, t-shirt, or tank top), partial (i.e., exposed midriffs and/or cleavage for women, shirtless males, exposed thighs, and/or buttocks for men and

		women), full (i.e., human character's body did not appear to be covered by any clothing, save shoes or a hat, or if a covering of any sort as by a towel or such was transparent in nature), not applicable, or cannot tell."**
Body Proportion	Realistic, Unrealistic, Not Applicable, Cannot Tell	"gauged by the propensity of characters to resemble an average male or female human... whether... the average person could look like the character without the aid of augmentation, plastic surgery, or chemical injections."**
Sex Talk	Present or Absent	"any verbal reference or dialogue regarding sex or sexual issues."**
Sexual Behavior	Yes or No	"a character's actions that imply a sense of likely sexual intimacy"**
Appropriateness Of Attire	Appropriate, Inappropriate, Not Applicable, Cannot Tell	"the degree to which garments worn by a character were suitable and functional with respect to the task at hand"**
Breast Size	Flat, Average, Voluptuous **	Based on relative breast size to body and average breast size of women.
Waist Size	Disproportionately Small, Average, Disproportionately Large, Cannot Tell	"the waistline of characters in proportion to the rest of the body"**

* If no name was provided in the trailer or review, one was assigned.

**From (Downs and Smith 2010)

Part 2

I also analyzed reviews of each game to confirm accurate coding of character attributes and variables. Some data from reviews themselves were collected to establish comparison of Ivory's (2006) study. Ivory contends that given video games often employ variable and unpredictable formatting compared to other media representations, we must

be open to new and alternative methods of approaching analysis of video game content. Ivory proposes video game reviews from a popular video game website to be potentially beneficial in that the reviewers are often “professional full-time staffers who are experienced and knowledgeable video game players” (2006:106), and will likely present accurate data on plot and characters.

The primary element of the Ivory’s 2006 study that I address seeks to explore the overall attitudes of reviewers on the sexualization of video game characters as expressed by the review content itself. This is the focus of part 2. Analysis for game reviews will be more limited than in the 2006 study by Ivory. For this project, I focus on the content of the individual mentions of sexualization and reviewers’ general attitudes towards characters in terms of the gender, sexual appeal, or related topics. It is this aspect that seemed lacking in Ivory’s 2006 work and I intend to expand on the discussion offered by Ivory.

FINDINGS

Part 1

Tests for statistical significance were conducted and only variables found to be statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level are included for analysis. ‘Sex talk’ was not found to be present in any video game trailer, and therefore will be left out of all tables and findings, but this omission will be briefly discussed following this report of findings.

From within trailers of 23 of the most popular games of 2014, 85 characters were identified for analysis. Men (64.5%, $n = 54$) were found to be present more often than women (36.5%, $n = 31$). The role of the character was not found to be statistically

significant when accounting for sex. However, it is worth noting that 63% of the men found in trailers were primary characters, whereas only 38.7% of women found were primary characters. There was one case of games with male primary characters where no female characters were found, and there were two games where primary characters were female and no male characters of significance were found in trailers.

Variables dealing with sexualized depictions (sexually revealing clothing, nudity, body proportion, sex talk, sexual behavior, appropriateness of attire, breast, and waist size) were each analyzed by sex. Sexually revealing clothing was found in 4% of male characters ($n = 2$), whereas 39% of women ($n = 12$) were depicted in sexually revealing clothing. Chi-square analysis confirms this association at the $p < .01$ level. Nudity was also recorded for each character. All entries fell under 'no nudity' or 'partial nudity', no instances of full nudity occurred. Chi-square analysis indicate a significant relationship between sex and nudity at the $p < .05$ level. Of the 31 women in the videos, 42% of them ($n = 13$) were depicted as partially nude. Men were found to be depicted this way 11% of the time ($n = 6$).

Looking at body proportion yielded unexpected results as no statistical significance was observed between men and women in this regard. The data failed to indicate a significant difference in the likelihood of sex predicting unrealistic body proportion. It is worth noting however, that 11% of men ($n = 6$) were found to be depicted unrealistically compared to 16% of women ($n = 5$). The actual occurrences of this may take on more meaning when discussed outside of quantitative capacity. This is discussed more below.

As mentioned above, 'sex talk' has been completely excluded as none was found to be present, however sexual behavior was depicted five times. Even though only one man was found to be depicting sexual behavior and four women, this was found to be just beyond the realm of statistical significance ($p = .057$), with 2% of men and 13% being depicted in this manner.

Characters' depiction of wearing appropriate attire to the task at hand was also analyzed. A statistically significant chi-square was found for this in regards to sex at the $p < .05$ level. Women's attire seemed inappropriate 25.8% of the time ($n = 8$) whereas men were found to be lacking in adequate attire only 4% ($n = 2$) of the time. Typically the inappropriate attire was attributable to the character in question lacking adequate covering or 'body armor' in combative situations, or wearing restrictive clothing where agile body movement would be required.

No instances of 'disproportionately large' waists occurred, and the five cases of 'disproportionately small' waists were all women. This was found to be statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. This small waisted ideal constituted 16% of women found in the study. In four of these five cases, the women were also depicted as partially nude.

The final element of the initial part of this analysis is a break-down of the findings by ESRB rating. These findings were skewed by an unexpected lack of games not rated mature. That is to say that only one game was rated E for everyone, only a few T for Teen ($n = 3$) and the vast majority of games ($n = 19$) were rated M for Mature. While comparisons involving 'E' rated games may not be suitable, there is no statistical difference in the depictions of nudity or other sexualizing variables between games rated

‘T’ and those rated ‘M’. Because of this statistical outlier, ESRB analysis is excluded from this analysis.

Part 2

The reviews of all 23 games included in the study showed very little in terms of sexualization of characters. More interesting data can be found in the breakdown of reviewer identity and the discussions found that, even if somewhat briefly, expose issues of sexualization and objectification of women in the games reviewed. More specific discussion on reviews content can be found below. It is interesting however to note that while 17% ($n = 4$) of the games reviewed were by women, it was only one woman, Carolyn Petit. Whereas the remaining 19 games were reviewed by men (eight other authors, all men).

Of the 23 games included in analysis, only three corresponding reviews from Gamespot.com contained mentions of sexualization of characters in the game. In every case it was a female character(s). Interestingly, two of those three reviews are written by the only female author found in this study. Of her four reviews, Petit discusses sexualization of women in the game in two separate reviews. It’s also interesting to note that of those few games whose trailers did depict men as sexualized (or just partly nude), none of them were the games whose reviews mention anything to do with characters sexualized depictions. These findings, as well as a more thorough discussion of the content of these mentions of sexualization, continue below.

DISCUSSION

The purpose for conducting this research was to evaluate the representation of women in video games. The most recent research found in this process indicated (from games published in 2003) that women were underrepresented and when they were present, they were more likely to be sexualized. The research undertaken in this study confirms these reports, although some differences and interesting observations should be discussed.

Overall representation of women in the popular games examined in this study show that women are indeed less likely to be represented in video games. The gap, however, seems to be declining. Downs and Smith (2010) found that only 14% of characters in the game were women, while my findings indicate that a much larger proportion (36.5%) were found in top selling games from 2013. It is important to also delineate characters that appear and characters that constitute the primary or playable characters. Downs and Smith found that only 12% of primary characters were women. My data indicate another shift over the ten year span, as 26% of primary characters were found to be women. Despite not quite confirming Jansz' and Martis' (2007) finding that women were in lead roles as much as men, this study confirms that the number of women in lead roles in games is at least on the rise.

Even though the amount of women in games may have undergone a positive shift over the last decade, the manner in which those women are presented may not have progressed along with their inclining numbers. This study finds very similar proportions of the women depicted in games as sexualized. Downs and Smith (2010) found that women were extremely more likely than men to be depicted in sexualized manner and to

be partially nude (41% and 43% respectively). The data I collected in this study reveal similar findings, with 39% of women depicted in sexually revealing ways, and 42% of them partially nude, the differences over the ten year period are obviously negligible.

One finding that varied to a surprising degree was the overall proportions of men's and women's bodies. Downs and Smith (2010) found that 25% of women were depicted with unrealistic figures, whereas only 2% of men were depicted with unrealistic bodies. However, my own data reflect a shift that describes an increase in the proportion of men with unrealistic body proportions (11%) and a decrease in the proportion of women (16%). The context of this was across the board the same however, in that men's unrealistic depictions were generally of an unrealistically huge body, muscled and masculine features, and women were typically portrayed with abnormally large breasts (often equal to or larger than their heads) paired with unattainably thin waistlines.

One case where this was particularly troubling was with the only 'E for everyone' rated game included in the study, *Mario 3D World*. Nintendo's beloved poster child is recognizable to gamers and non-gamers alike. Mario franchise's popularity in gaming sets the bar for achievement in game sales and recognition. It is all the more troubling then to consider that even a game such as Mario, approved for all audiences, could send troubling gendered messages to its consumers. While there were no depictions of sexualization (sexually revealing, nudity, sex behavior, etc.), the character of Peach, the only woman in the main cast of *Mario 3D World*, is depicted with a markedly unrealistic waist line and with attire that would seem inappropriate for the tasks at hand, especially when positioned directly next to the male characters. While Mario and Luigi enjoy unfettered movement around an action platforming game in their overalls and t-shirts

where jumping, swimming, running, climbing and fighting are all necessary to advance, Peach is dressed in what would seem to be a very formal and heavy dress with what might be assumed to be a girdle underneath, given her miniscule waistline.

In regards to overall appropriateness of attire of characters found in games, Downs and Smith (2010) reported that 16% of women were in inappropriate attire and only 2% of men. My data reveal a regressive shift in that 26% of women and only 4% of men were found to be donning inappropriate attire for the tasks that the games present to the player.

The reviews gathered for analysis in this study found some similarities and some differences from the study conducted by Ivory (2006). Ivory found that there were not statistically significant amounts of discussions or comments on sexualization of characters found in the games being reviewed. Although the actual number of mentions of sexualization or sexual appeal of characters in the game declined in this study, I had the same outcome, finding no statistical significance. However, there is more to be gleaned from a review of these publications.

Ivory notes that there is some discussion of “reviewer’s disapproval of sexualized female portrayals” (2006: 111). However, only one example is given, that of a golf game wherein one primary character (the only character who is a woman) is a professional woman golfer who is “young and attractive, but unproven” (2006:111). The author’s mention of this leaves one wondering what other mentions were made in the reviews included in the study and what they may indicate about the overall attitude of reviewers towards this trend in gaming. In this current study, three mentions of sexualization of characters occur. I will discuss all three.

One male reviewer, Martin Gaston, mentioned sexualization within the game reviewed. In his review on *Dead Rising 3*, titled *Paint the Town Red*, Gaston states that, “Some of the more boisterous dialogue and lingering shots on the female characters also feel awkward and unwanted, but ultimately... has enough heart to be endearing” (2013). Like Ivory mentions, this seems to indicate that the reviewer is inclined to criticize the game for what is assumed to be a conscious decision to include a sexually exploitative depiction of women in a game that is otherwise positive. Gaston is the only male reviewer, of nine total, to call attention to sexualization of women in gaming. There are, however, two other reviews found that discuss overt sexualization. They are both from the only female reviewer present in the reviewer cohort employed by Gamespot.com for the most popular games of 2013.

Carolyn Petit reviews four games in this study. In two of these reviews of the games *Grand Theft Auto: V* (GTAV), and *Tomb Raider* she sheds negative light on sexualization of the female characters. Both reviews mentioned present very different situations observed in the games. *Tomb Raider* is a game centered on a woman, Lara, who is both a scholar and an adventurer, not unlike the popular culture icon, Indiana Jones. However, the franchise she is part of has a history of sexist depictions of its lead character, with inappropriate attire as well as sexualized dimensions of partial nudity and sexually revealing clothing. While this modern depiction of Lara seems to be toned down, (I found only that she is depicted with some partial nudity and ‘voluptuous’ breast size) Petit brings to light a troubling aspect of the game in its plot, that an unnamed male character attempts to rape or otherwise sexually assault Lara. While the details are vague, Petit calls this occurrence in the game “an unpleasant moment” and “most harrowing”

(2013b). Without knowing more of the context of this game event, it is hard to draw any other conclusions about its inclusion other than if 'Lara' were instead 'Luke', this would not have happened in the game.

In her review titled *City of Angels and Demons*, Petit (2013a) dives even further into revealing the overt misogyny found in the game content. The media attention given to the Grand Theft Auto franchise often revolves around its violence and sexualization. Petit's review describes no change in the most recent installment of the game. Petit points out many instances of misogyny, not just in the characters portrayal but in the very context and environment in the game in general. She paints a disturbing picture. It is interesting that while the video trailer seems to draw attention away from these aspects (there are no dramatic displays of misogyny or overt sexualization, although the one female character identified does have low cut top revealing 'voluptuous' breast size) the review calls attention to it in many ways. Indeed it would seem that explicit misogyny is an inherent part of the game.

Petit explains that women are predominantly portrayed as "strippers, prostitutes, long-suffering wives, humorless girlfriends and goofy, new-age feminists we're meant to laugh at" (2013a). She describes how characters actively "glorify male sexuality while demeaning women" (2013a). This spans not just comments spoken by primary characters but also the very environments of the game, such as the advertisements you encounter while playing. Petit provides examples of this, like "using women as a urinal" or advertising a perfume to make women "smell like a bitch" (2013a). Petit clearly states that these depictions detract from an otherwise innovative and enjoyable game, calling them "unnecessary" and "wrong". Importantly, Petit points out that "Yes, these are

exaggerations of misogynistic undercurrents in our own society, but not satirical ones” (2013a). Had these game events and characters been accompanied by some avenue of explanation as satire of sexism, perhaps they would not simply “reinforce and celebrate sexism” as Petit describes (2013a).

CONCLUSION

Through my examination of video game content found in trailers and professional reviews of the most popular, top selling games, I analyzed the representation of women in gaming by looking at: 1) the proportion of men vs women depicted as characters; 2) the ratio of sexualized, unrealistic or inappropriate depictions between men and women; and 3) what professional reviews have to say about these depictions. This study continues the discussion of the evolution of these depictions in video games and ultimately finds the following: 1) while their inclusion in games is increasing women are still disproportionately absent in games relative to men; and 2) despite being depicted more frequently than previously studied they continue to be disproportionately sexualized and given inappropriate attire for the task at hand.

In regards to what reviews have to reveal, more data must be collected. Although the data of these 23 games yielded some interesting observations, a larger study focusing on reviews and reviewers may give more insight into the gaming industry and the voices who lead the way in public opinion. Despite the small size of this study, the fact that most of the discussion of sexualization of characters comes from an author who is herself a woman, may indicate further studies need to be conducted to understand this connection. On the surface it would seem that women critics are underemployed. Given the equal

status of gamers being almost half women, we might expect that women would also represent about half of the professional reviewers, however in this study it is shown not to be the case.

On a final note, in all three cases of reviews mentioning sexualization of women, all three ultimately made statements ‘forgiving’ or ‘dismissing’ the critique as secondary to the enjoyment of the game. Petit states that Los Santos, the setting of GTAV, “may leave you with a few psychological scars, but you shouldn’t let that stop you from visiting”, and despite the depiction of attempted sexual assault on the woman assuming the lead role in *Tomb Raider*, it is a “terrific origin story” (2013). Martin Gaston, after alluding to “awkward and unwanted” moments where the game portrays “lingering shots on the female characters”, concludes that *Dead Rising 3* “has enough heart to be endearing” (2013). These reviews seem to indicate that the level of overt misogyny found in the games is not a deciding factor in its recommendation or clearly in its proliferation more generally. For this reason, among others, more research must be conducted to better understand the attitudes and opinions of those within the gaming industry and those who are tasked with critical evaluation of it.

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APPENDIX

GAME REFERENCE LIST

1. Call of Duty: Ghosts
Trailer: (www.gamespot.com/videos/call-of-duty-ghosts-gameplay-launch-trailer/2300-6415667/)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/call-of-duty-ghosts-review/1900-6415523/)
Let slip the dogs of war.
by Shaun McInnis on November 5, 2013
2. Grandtheft Auto V
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqjnJ_EyHb0)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/grand-theft-auto-v-review/1900-6414475/)
City of Angels and Demons
by Carolyn Petit on September 16, 2013
3. Super Mario 3D World
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZSwQX30DU8)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/super-mario-3d-world-review/1900-6415544/)
Purrfect platforming.
by Mark Walton on November 19, 2013
4. Assassins Creed IV: Black Flag
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtZBuWgnkzk)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassin-s-creed-iv-black-flag-review/1900-6415509/)
Call me Edward.
by Shaun McInnis on October 29, 2013
5. Battlefield 4
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5JF6_u5qeY)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/battlefield-4-review/1900-6415517/)
Have a field day.
by Chris Watters on October 28, 2013
6. Final Fantasy X HD Remaster
Trailer: (www.gamespot.com/videos/final-fantasy-x-x-2-hd-remaster-na-launch-trailer/2300-6417613/)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/final-fantasy-x-x-2-hd-remaster-review/1900-6415711/)
This is my story.
by Josiah Renaudin on March 27, 2014

7. The Last of Us
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQpdSVF_k_w)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/the-last-of-us-review/1900-6409197/)
One unforgettable character proves humanity is worth saving in the bleak and brutal The Last of Us.
by Tom Mc Shea on June 5, 2013
8. Ryse: Son of Rome
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecsCrOEY17c)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/ryse-son-of-rome-review/1900-6415571/)
You are not entertained.
by Mark Walton on November 21, 2013
9. Dead Rising 3
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhvCbyxSyrw)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/dead-rising-3-review/1900-6415558/)
Paint the town red.
by Martin Gaston on November 18, 2013
10. Killzone
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rBAkj5Egok)
Review: (<http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/killzone-shadow-fall-review/1900-6415536/>)
The art of war.
by Kevin VanOrd on November 13, 2013
11. Sims 3
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWhbxEjFuWc)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/the-sims-3-review/1900-6210540/)
The latest Sims game is also the greatest, striking a terrific balance between the fresh and the familiar.
by Kevin VanOrd on June 1, 2009
12. Batman: Arkham Origins
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=9k3hi3oGq6A)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/batman-arkham-origins-review/1900-6415506/)
Holy predictability, Batman!
by Carolyn Petit on October 25, 2013
13. Beyond: Two Souls
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4keuTrVO5g)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/beyond-two-souls-review/1900-6415418/)
A tale of ghostly intrigue.
by Tom McShea on October 8, 2013

14. Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqySsJM2yQc)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim-review/1900-6344618/)
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is the big, bold, and beautiful sequel you hoped for and is sure to bewitch you for countless hours.
by Kevin VanOrd on November 10, 2011
15. God of War: Ascension
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJMK8oFY1rA)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/god-of-war-ascension-review/1900-6404941/)
The Multiplayer's a bust, but God of War: Ascension's campaign is a gloriously bloody adventure filled with exhilarating combat.
By Mark Walton on March 3, 2013.
16. Diablo III
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7MVQ33YF9M)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/diablo-3-review/1900-6415704/)
Fortune and glory.
by Carolyn Petit on March 18, 2014
17. Tomb Raider
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQSKncDUhXw)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/tomb-raider-review/1900-6404378/)
Tomb Raider is an exhilarating action adventure that serves as a terrific origin story for the iconic Lara Croft.
by Carolyn Petit on March 13, 2013
18. Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Blacklist
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHwI0z8-X2Y)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/tom-clancys-splinter-cell-blacklist-review/1900-6412806/)
Do it loudly. Do it silently. But for God's sake, do it.
by Kevin VanOrd on August 14, 2013
19. Fable Anniversary
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXAGo1pCFNM)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/fable-anniversary-review/1900-6415659/)
It's sometimes sunny in Albion.
by Kevin VanOrd on February 7, 2014
20. Thief
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=of_3FxnsCZc)

Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/thief-review/1900-6415675/)
Crime of dispassion.
by Kevin VanOrd on February 24, 2014

21. Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGripzDePT4)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/castlevania-lords-of-shadow-2-review/1900-6415677/)
Family first.
by Peter Brown on February 25, 2014
22. inFamous: Second Son
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahK-ir1mDzc)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/infamous-second-son-review/1900-6415705/)
Can't find a better man.
by Tom Mc Shea on March 20, 2014
23. Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes
Trailer: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=sExY86uB3To)
Review: (www.gamespot.com/reviews/metal-gear-solid-5-ground-zeroes-review/1900-6415701/)
Kept you waiting, huh?
by Peter Brown on March 18, 2014