

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE REPRESENTATION OF TRANSGENDER CHARACTERS AS DISGRACEFUL AND DISABLED BEINGS IN GAMING MEDIA

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Abstract

The issue of whether transgender people have fair representation in media, specifically gaming media, has been an area of study and debate, especially when it concerns the accurate representation of their identity. Often gaming content may include one or more transgender characters in the storyline and how they are portrayed determines the nature of their representation. Individual studies have been conducted to analyze various sample game titles, and their representation and outlook of transgender people, as well as the community itself. The purpose of this study is to compile relevant studies into a cohesive whole in order to further substantiate the hypothesis. Through a systematic review, the regressive nature of transgender representation in video games has been explored.

Keywords: Transgender, Community, Gaming, Representation, Characters, Storyline, LGBTQ, Transphobia, Gender Identity

INTRODUCTION

Gaming as a whole is a multibillion-dollar industry which is pumped with more and more money each year. They took in about US \$9.5 billion in the US in 2007, 11.7 billion in 2008, and 25.1 billion in 2010 (ESA Report, 2011). It involves personnel from several different types of disciplines and plays a large part in worldwide employment (P Zackariasson, 2012). The gaming revolution began between the 1970's- 1980's with the popularity of arcade games in 8-bit format which birthed gaming arcades world over, with notable titles such as Pacman, Donkey Kong and Mario (Chikhani, 2015). Gaming rose as an industry in the 1990's with the Nintendo-Sega-Sony console wars (Kelion, 2014) which lead to revolutionary improvements in gaming performance and graphics giving us the PlayStation and Nintendo 64. Technology has brought gaming in the present age to a whole new level with increased interactivity and life-like graphics. These are dedicated gaming systems or machines unlike multipurpose personal computing systems which also function as gaming systems. Gaming has spread across multiple platforms with the recent proliferation of mobile gaming serving as a lucrative platform for further development.

An area of study that has significantly grown in the past decade is the gender portrayal in video games with the focus primarily being women and treatment of women across various game genre and titles. Despite the gaming community being split nearly in half between men and women a documented trend of hyper masculinity has been observed with online harassment of female gamers being the main indicator (Jeffrey H. Kuznekoff, 2012). One of the most prominent examples of this being the gamergate controversy. This started out with the release of Zoe Quinn's game Depression quest 2013 which received harsh criticism from reviewers who believed it didn't deserve its status as a game due to its text only format. The criticisms were later gender specific attacks as she was later accused online by Erin Gjoni, her ex-boyfriend, of sleeping with game journalists to garner positive reviews (Todd, 2015).

One of the leading examiners of gender portrayal in video games is Anita Sarkeesian and is well known for her short series 'Tropes Vs Women' that ran from 2013 all the way till 2016 further increasing the reach of feminism in video games and bringing it into the modern gaming era. Her primary focus being on deconstructing common tropes observed in video games concerned with femininity, such as sexual objectification and damsel in distress tropes. Her contention being that all the above-mentioned concepts are purely to further the main mission of the hero, women in this context are mainly used for narratological purposes. They are used only as plot devices in the overall predominant male narrative (Sarkeesian, 2014).

Another area of study is that of LGBTQ representation in video games. LGBTQ playable characters are usually rare with a few exceptions like Hana from fear effect 2, Trevor Philips in Grand theft auto V and Curtis Craig from Phantasmagoria: a puzzle of flesh, all who are bisexual with their sexuality only hinted at in the game. Some characters are shown as homosexuals through the use of relationship exposition as is done in Last of Us with Ellie and Riley or Fallout 3 with Carol and Greta. Sexual orientation is portrayed differently in comparison to gender identity, this is what differentiates homosexual representation in games from transgender representation. Transgender representation among the LGBTQ community in video games is even sparser with existing representation being mostly regressive in nature. The purpose of this study is to explore this area further and shed light on the current scenario of transgender representation in video games.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Too many, representations of minorities in entertainment formats such as video games may not be a big thing, however it is mediums such as these that influence the masses by pushing across messages which mostly reflect the mindset of the industry itself. Transgender in particular have been fighting discrimination in every aspect of their life such as legal, medical, social and work life along with the rest of the LGBTQ community. Gaming too is another medium where the fight continues for fair representation even in terms of gender, specifically female characters. In 2007 a research was conducted on video game box art in order to analyze how females were

depicted in the various instances they made it on the cover (Melinda Burgess, 2007). Box art from over two hundred and twenty-five console games across the most popular game consoles were analyzed across various areas of representation. The study found that male characters were twice as likely to be found on video game covers as female characters were. Male characters were also five times as likely to be the main character of the game. Female characters were also shown to be more likely to be sexually objectified than males, with physical objectification being primary. The female form was also more likely to be exaggerated or glorified than their male counterparts. The study also showed that in terms of plot impact female characters were less likely to affect the overarching plot, with their presence being mostly for 'eye candy', or in other words to arouse or titillate the audience. At a character level male were also more likely to be portrayed as violent as compared to female characters.

Video games had the same potential power as films and movies did in terms of influencing the masses regarding body image and gender schema (Friedberg, 2015). This is done by weaving a world with a narrative and characters similar to that of movies, with the exception of higher level of interactivity through the gaming medium (Ivory, 2006). The study found that the same gender tropes used in other forms of media were used in the narratives of games as well, especially sexual objectification, although female characters were under represented overall. Another method of analyzing is by measuring gender role stereotyping by observing the presence of women game characters as well as analyzing the clothes, specifically the differences between men and women (Berrin Beasley, 2002). The study found that female characters were vastly underrepresented, with there being more characters of indeterminate gender than female characters. Female characters were also predominantly seen in low cut clothing and bare arms in comparison to male characters, also shown having a large bust. This showed that females in video games were portrayed and dressed in a manner meant to draw attention to their sexuality and the more gamers interacted with such characters, the more it normalized such portrayal of women in the minds of players.

In 1998 a study was conducted to analyses depictions of women in games through a coding schema to describe various ways of depiction (Dietz, 1998). The study showed that the most common portrayal of women was the absence of women altogether, or presented as a victim constantly in need of saving commonly referred to as the 'damsel in distress' trope, a term recently popularized by Anita Sarkeesian. They were also shown to be depicted to be curvaceous with a specific focus on breasts and hips which makeup the overall form. This leaves the possibility open for the youth to take and internalize these representations into their own subjective understanding of gender. Another important area of research includes investigating video games for sexist imagery and its potency to influence the perception of gender (Karen E Dill-Shackelford, 2007). An example of this was the descriptions of male and female characters in terms of expectations from the responses. Male video game characters were defined as violent, aggressive, strong and in general having a hostile attitude, whereas female video game characters were described as thin, curvaceous, provocative and sexual in general. The most dominant characteristic of the male character was muscularity

whereas for females it was big boobs. The traits expected of female characters were Subservience, victimhood and politeness whereas for male characters words like cool, rage and asshole were used to describe male characters. The study suggests that such hyper masculine character traits stem from their violence and strength, whereas hyper feminine traits make women's sexuality the core of their being.

When it comes to the representation of LGBTQ characters there is constant pressure to conform to heteronormative standards and patterns derived from media narratives. Developers are trying to create and bring in more homosexual characters into video games although it ends up being a caricature of homosexuality. In order for new games with homosexual characters to be available there needs to be a proliferation of producers who are either not homophobic or identify themselves as homosexual themselves (Shaw, 2009). The study also shows that purely focusing on getting LGBTQ game developers may hamper efforts by developers not in that community to help with the same. Delegating game developers to such group may leave the possibility of the ghettoization of content. Developers face problems of complexity while trying to introduce queer characters into video games, as decisions made to showcase homosexuality through relationships would be different than directly introducing homosexual characters (Greer, 2013). Games like Dragon Age and Fable allow for the possibility of queer, performative plurality that goes well beyond the limits of singular categorization. This includes a host of identities and identification. This brings further attention to the queer perspective which entails coding the queer into the games in order to increase their overall representation by improving gay and lesbian identity. The study also showed that greater opportunities rest in the hands of game publishers and designers who could create games in which the active performance of sexuality would have an impact on the outcome of the game, without leaving it as just a provisional option. This is however a rarity in most contemporary video games which even have a queer element.

A study in 2016 archived a list of games with some sort of LGBTQ content broadly defined from at least a single source (Adrienne Shaw, 2016). A total of 351 game titles were compiled and narrowed down across all gaming platforms, and 550 examples of LGBTQ content were found among them. The oldest game titles dated back to 1986. Game characters were either of the NPC (Non-playable characters) or PC (Playable characters) types. NPC's did not have their sexuality stated apart from them being romantic options for the PC's. Under queer content, it included content relating to queer men, queer women, intersex, transgender, bisexual, and non-binary, gay, asexual and other sub-categories. The study showed that often in most of the content of these games, sexuality is not openly known or stated explicitly and is often understood after playing as both the male and female PC. In other cases, it is revealed through dialogue options with the exchanges more often than not being inconsequential to the game. Most of the content in queer studies with the context of gaming focus on homosexuality as primary area of study and do not expand as such on the nature of transgender characters and representations in games. A chunk of writing on the subject is mostly available in discussion forums and smaller blogs. Online utilities and archives such as Queerly Represent Me exist, which focus on LGBTQ content in games and cover non-

binary and transgender characters (Cole, 2017). The study overall highlights the need to expand further in the area of transgender studies in video games.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this study was a qualitative systematic review, data collection involved compiling relevant studies from journals and other sources associated with the hypothesis. Systematic review involves reviewing existing research to offer a meticulous summary and evidence of all existing data in connection with the research question. The eligibility criteria for the studies chosen for the review were basically studies related to or associated with gender portrayals in gaming, sexuality and orientation in gaming, as well as gender identity in gaming. This included mention of gaming media, LGBTQ and all its subcategories such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex, asexual, non-binary, transgender and others. No restrictions based on publication date were applied with date of the oldest publication chosen being from 1998. Information sources for the various studies collected in the review include online sociological journals and online databases such as Research gate, Academia.edu as well as PsycNET. Apart from the nature of the study no other limiters or elimination criteria were placed on the information and study search.

A total of nine studies were selected for the review which covered areas of gender portrayal, gender identity as well as sexuality and sexual orientation in the context of gaming media, content and the industry in general. The dates of these studies ranged from the oldest being 1998 and the newest being 2018.

FINDINGS

Attempts were made to identify certain trends and themes within the industry regarding sexism and portrayal of women across gaming media. This was done by conducting an analysis of two hundred 25 video game box art covers across various consoles including the most popular ones which were obtained from online retail sites (Murphy, 2010). They were analyzed for their portrayal of men and women on the covers. The findings of the analysis showed that out of 225 covers 173 showed human characters and the hypotheses made were based on covers which had human characters. The analysis revealed that males were twice as likely to be featured on the box cover art as women. Male characters were significantly more likely to be present overall and three times more likely to be featured on covers rated 'M' for mature. Subsequently agency was measured as a function of the game, as to whether the character was essential to the main plot or just an ancillary character without a specific part to play. Males were shown to be five times more likely to be portrayed as the main character. Even when female characters were the lead, they required male characters along with them to assert their dominance and often served as the role of the protector or guide. In terms of role objectification females were far more likely to be objectified than males, this was true even for side female characters as compared to side male characters. Female characters were also significantly more likely to be sexually objectified than male

characters (Davis, 2018). The study found that the female form was also far more likely to be glorified or exaggerated than the male form, and served a more ornamental purpose than any significant meaning to overall plot. Male characters were also significantly more likely to be portrayed as violent. Through other studies character representations have been found to be geared towards the male players.

A study in 2006 conducted a content analysis using video game review as its target from websites with heavy traffic to investigate the common portrayal of male and female characters. The finding of the study was consistent with all the previous studies before it showing that female characters were significantly underrepresented in the sense that they were present in far fewer of the samples than men (less than 42%) and more often than not sexualized than their male counterparts. Males' characters appeared in images of reviews in at least 78% of them. Active male characters were mentioned more often than active female characters, also a majority of the reviews indicated male playable characters while they didn't make a mention of female playable characters. In terms of depictions regardless of the underrepresented female population female characters were more mentioned about their sexuality and attractiveness than the male characters. Reviewed video games images also portrayed sexualized women more than sexualized men. The findings showed that the same tropes used in movies and film-based media were used in games as well through the use of narrative.

The portrayal of women in a total of 47 random games of the Sony PlayStation and Nintendo 64 consoles revealed that there was a significant bias in terms of the number of male and female characters present in the games as well as in the manner of dressing (Standley, 2009). Out of the 597 characters that were identified only 82 were female. Among the consoles Nintendo 64 games had even fewer women than the PlayStation games. It also showed that the majority of female characters wore more explicit clothing than male characters which was measured through character sleeve length with nearly half of female characters having no sleeve at all. Their attire being mostly tank tops, bathing suits and halter tops. It showed that characters with lower necklines and exposed cleavage were mostly women. The female characters were portrayed as way more voluptuous and bustier. A majority of the female characters were dressed up in a manner to attract attention to their bodies and glorify the female form.

Violence and traditional gender roles were a staple factor in video games. In 41% of the games with characters there were no female characters at all. Women were portrayed as sex objects in at least 28% of these games (Tomaro, 1999). At least 80% of the games included violence or aggression as part of object or strategy. Although 27% of the games had socially acceptable forms of aggression almost half the games included violence towards one another, whereas at least 21% of violence was directed towards women. The findings also showed that only 15% of female characters were depicted in heroic leads or action characters. The predominant portrayal of women is usually through victimhood in most game situations or scenarios where she has to be rescued by the male character. This is more commonly known as the damsel in distress trope. The findings show that when female characters are represented they are usually dependent on the male character. Video game characters in general are icons in youth

popular culture, but in-depth research on their role in gender socialization is not as common (Byrne, 2013). A content analysis was done in 2007 of the images of video game characters from top rated and selling American gaming magazines. It showed that male characters (83%) were more likely than female characters (62%) to be shown or portrayed as aggressive. Female characters were more likely than male characters to be shown as sexualized (60% versus 1%), scantily clad (39% versus 8%) and as showing a mix of aggression and sex (1% versus 39%).

A survey of teens further confirmed that stereotypes of male characters as violent and aggressive whereas female characters as sexually objectified physical specimens were held even by non-gamers (Dill, 2007). Studies were discussed in terms of the role media played in socializing sexism. The findings showed that a majority of female characters came under the curvaceously thin female/sexualized description. In terms of hyper masculinity only 3.8% of non-game characters fit into the stereotypical hyper masculine box whereas the rest were labelled as video gamers/computer nerds.

When it comes to LGBT representation previous studies have shown the investment of stakeholders when it comes to LGBT representation in the media (Harper, 2018). A study was done in 2009 to analyze LGBT representation in video games from a more cultural production perspective. This involved factors such as how bisexuality, transgender and homosexuality identities were represented in the medium, how an audience for a medium or text is constructed, the type of backlash that would come from LGBT and conservative groups, not including industry-based reprisals like ratings or censorship as well as the structure and funding of the industry. The findings of the study revealed that the general lack of LGBT content had more to do with the various practical aspects of design than active exclusion of any sort. Game design is shown to be at a state conveying emotions through characters is relatively difficult making it easier for developers to rely on stereotypes and archetypes. The industry itself is in need of maturation before there is a possibility of good LGBT based content (Brightman, 2014). The study also showed that as games focus less on relationship complexity it is easier for game developers to rely on stereotypical heterosexual relationships. It was shown in certain games that stories which have little emphasis on relationships find it hard to have a traditionally underrepresented group as the main character. Representation had to fit within the logic of the game mechanics and story. The incorporation of LGBT concepts like homosexuality and bisexuality were primarily incorporated in situations where choice was involved. In games such as the Sims, Fallout 1 & 2, Fable and Bully were offered the ability to form avatar relationships with both genders. The study also shows the difficulty of incorporating a homosexual character into the game without the game being entirely about the character with discourse and controversy surrounding it.

Queer theory was used in order to analyze the terms and conditions used in the inclusion of non-heterosexual characters in contemporary mass market RPG's (Role Playing Games) specifically with a focus on Bio Ware's Dragon age series and Lionhead studio's Fable. The study showed that the intersection of queer theories resistance of presumptive categories for theories of game design and sexuality, primarily the concept of affordances which provided an effective critique of the

performative constraints through which people are able to play queer (Krobova ,2013). The study showed that even total blindness to gender and sexual orientation may lead reduction in queer identification. Although games like Dragon age and Fable may allow possibilities of queer play, as well as identification and identities that exceed any single categorization they are usually bordered or surrounded by normative constructions of sexuality like for example the institution of marriage. Inclusion of homosexual couples maybe considered a form of progressive politics but still elevated marriage to a privileged relationship form (Walters, 2014). It showed that such frameworks allowed queer identification to become intelligible although they were far from neutral. The queer perspective also draws in attention to the challenges faced by designers in coding the queerness in. The findings also highlighted the greater opportunities for designers and developers who could make sexuality in games performative so as to matter to the central plot, making it consequential instead of just a side show.

A thorough review of video game of content was done with regards to characters, actions, traits, artefacts, queer games/narratives, relationships/sex/romance, mentions, locations as well as homophobia or transphobia (Shaw, 2016). More than 500 examples of LGBTQ were analyzed from 300 games spanning across 30 years. The findings of the study showed how queerness in gender and sexuality were integrated into digital games. Character sexuality analysis showed that most LGBTQ characters were NPC's, from minor to major to background characters. A majority of the LGBTQ content were largely inconsequential to game progress. Homosexual characters were identified mostly through ambiguous signifiers based on stereotypes such as dressing, mannerisms and other visual cues. The data showed that implicitly gay characters markers were a bit more ambiguous. Some of the character's sexuality in the study were portrayed through relationships such as that of Fallout 3 and Last of us. It was also shown that sexuality is often market driven with characters being removed from games in the case of Street Rage III where a boss character 'Ash' was removed for the U.S release due to his homosexual depiction. In terms of gender very few openly transgender characters were identified, a rare example being Krem from Dragon Age Inquisition who in the game is an openly transgender man, and in many cases of transgender women it is seen as a problem to be dealt with by other characters. The data also shows that games showed a lot of non-conformity which was mistaken for transgender representation. In terms of relationship/romance/sex in a lot of games sexuality was context dependent while for others it was explicit (Cook, 2018).

In many games same-sex relationships options included sex workers which were available for hire by PC's. In terms of transphobia and homophobia some characters were chastised and called gay if they did not reciprocate interest in the opposite sex (NDTV, 2014). Various forms or artefacts such as gay bars were minor forms of LGBTQ representations in these games apart from standard relationships and identities tropes. A large section of representation has been observed to be regressive in nature.

Transgender are often represented in problematic manners including suffering from mental illness, unstable, pathological liars to hoarse dark skin tone with unrealistic bodies appearing to be physically disabled. Gamers are given the choice to inflict harm

upon these characters through bodily impairment. This representation has played a major role in molding a negative perception towards transgender as damaged, negative individuals (Krobova, 2013). A significant portion of LGBTQ content specifically on transgender representation was found in online databases which analyzed representation through visual databases, spreadsheet databases, audience surveys and other projects. The data in general suggests a regressive pattern of LGBTQ representation, specifically transgender representation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings in conclusion, a walk through the current scenario of gender and LGBTQ representation in gaming media seems to indicate a regressive pattern, especially transgender representation. In terms of studies, gender specific studies seem to be the majority makeup of research into various forms of representation. The data from the review revealed a constant trend of sexual objectification of women across the gaming spectrum either through commentary, dressing, and the exaggerated female form or through other methods. LGBTQ representation also showed a regressive trend in terms of representation with a minimal presence across game titles, and existing representation being inconsequential to the overall story. Gender identity-based representation such as that of transgender was shown to be even more sparse with very few titles actually having transgender characters at all. Titles with transgender characters have shown to be usually deployed as ancillary characters with their gender identity only brought up in optional situations, with no real impact on the outcome of the game.

Globally there are 2.5 billion gamers easily influenced by what they play. The games themselves can shape the way they view/interact with the world and how they treat people. Symbolic annihilation is one of the primary concerns that stem from the regressive and minimal representation of LGBTQ minorities in media. Along with the miniscule representation is an understudied research area which requires more attention to and needs to be further explored. Therefore, from the systematic review conducted a regressive trend is observed in the overall transgender representation in the various gaming media.

The interactive/dynamic nature of gaming media as opposed to more static outlets provides players with the ability to experience a story first hand for extended durations, which can only further exacerbate the impact. As observed through gaming media, especially the last decade, from a development standpoint while there has been an increase in LGBTQ characters (with 'Tell Me Why' which came out in 2020 being the first major video game to feature a transgender main character), cis-normative representation continues to be the standard for primary characters as evidenced by the systematic review conducted.

RECOMMENDATION

Opportunities for a course correction start within the game development sphere itself. Starting by looking at having better physical representation in the development teams and having more LGBTQ creators and developers able to provide accurate portrayals with respect to character design and story. This would help bring fresh perspectives well as prevent formation of cis-normative/heteronormative echo chambers within the community. Having clear-cut depictions of LGBTQ characters in games would be preferable to 'queer baiting', as refraining to embrace queerness entirely leads to mixed messaging. While there has been an increase in the number of literal LGBTQ characters, the characters themselves need to be given pivotal roles in stories so as to be consequential to the overarching plot. Having more LGBT primary characters would have a better impact on mainstreaming and acceptance, breaking away from the current cis-normative standards and helping the community be more inclusive.

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