Video Games and Gender: Game Representation,
Gender Effects, Differences in Play, and Player Representation

Michele Zorrilla

COM 485

Backlund

May 12, 2010
I was introduced to the game *Diablo* when I was 10 years old. It was created by Blizzard Entertainment, one of the most well-known personal computer (PC) game companies today. Before that, I had spent my Saturday mornings watching cartoons and playing Super Nintendo with my brother. From that point on, I spent all of my time playing *Diablo*, mostly online. Fast forward 15 years to the present, and you will find the majority of my idle time spent on the computer; at least three nights a week you will find me playing World of Warcraft, Blizzard’s most successful game to date. Place me at home with my family, and you can be sure that you will find us good-naturedly hashing it out in Super Smash Brothers Brawl for the Nintendo Wii.

I was introduced to video games at a young age, and with the technological advances of the past two decades, the options available simply continue to grow. My parents had Pong; my generation had the Legend of Zelda and Super Mario Brothers. The current generation not only has the current iterations of the games that my generation did, but available to them is a whole array of video game titles and multiple arenas to play them in. Video games have not only expanded to various consoles, such as the Nintendo Wii, Xbox 360, and Playstation 3; PCs; and even portables such as the PlayStation Portable (PSP) and Nintendo DS, but game genres have also experienced an expansion. Popular genres include first-person shooters (FPS), role-playing games (RPG), adventure, simulation (SIM), strategy, puzzle, and gambling to name a few.

For every age and for almost every aspect of life, there is a game. Children today are being introduced to video games at even younger ages than my generation. 82% (55.7 million) of youth age 2 – 17 are gamers (NPD, 2009, Dec. 2), and households with kids 12 and under make up 45% of video game sales (NPD 2009, Sept 10). The average age to begin using the PC is 6 years old (NPD 2007, Oct 16), and 62% of children ages 2 to 12 use a computer (NPD 2009, Sept 10).
Video Games and Gender

Video game sales in the United States is a growing industry, reaching $21.4 billion in 2008 (NPD 2010, Jan. 14). And they aren’t popular simply in the United States; game sales in countries like Australia and Canada have been increasing (NPD 2009, Jan 30 & Apr 1). Even with the current economy and sales dipping, “December [2009] sales broke all industry records and underscores the incredible value customers find in computer and video games even in a down economy” (quoted in NPD 2010, Jan 14).

Time spent playing video games is on the rise in the U.S., including by children and girls (NPD 2007, Oct 16; 2008, Sept 23; 2009, Jun 29), especially in the online arena (NPD 2010, Mar 2). This rise underscores the importance and influence of video games on American culture; they have become so ubiquitous that more Americans play video games than go to the movies (NPD 2009, May 20). I myself am an example of this shift in media focus: the last time I played a game online was two hours ago, the last time I went to the movies was over six months ago.

Video games, like other media, undoubtedly have effects on shaping people’s perspectives. Before commenting on some of these effects, it is necessary to address theories concerning other media, its effects, and how they apply to this latest iteration today. While there are multiple theories in regards to media and its effects, there are two of particular concern to this paper: cultivation theory, and uses and gratifications theory.

**Uses and Gratifications Theory**

The basic question sought in uses and gratifications research is “Why do people become involved in one particular type of mediated communication or another, and what gratifications do they receive from it?” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 29) Concerned with motivations and satisfaction from media use by consumers, this theory no longer regards “mass audiences as passive sponges, but as active users of the media” (quoted in Ivy & Backlund, 2008, p. 99). Focusing on the
individual as the primary unit of data collection, uses and gratifications has been used in the analysis of “a plethora of psychological and social contexts including media dependency, ritualization, instrumental, communication facilitation, affiliation or avoidance, social learning, and role reinforcement” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 26). Individual motivations for utilizing media have been typified into “diversion (i.e., as an escape from routines or for emotional release), social utility (i.e., to acquire information for conversations), personal identity (i.e., to reinforce attitudes, beliefs, and values), and surveillance (i.e., to learn about one’s community, events, and political affairs)” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 26).

Previous research has focused primarily on television and other media (as mentioned in Ivy & Backlund, 2008), but the onset of the Internet (Ruggiero, 2000) and video game popularity has expanded the theory’s application. The reformulation of uses and gratifications to “stress comparisons between the gratifications sought from a medium with gratifications obtained” (LaRose, Mastro, & Eastin, 2001, p. 396) may be of particular interest regarding video games. Expected (and unexpected) negative outcomes may discourage media use (LaRose et al., 2001). Considering the challenges offered and the goals obtainable by overcoming these challenges (and through repeated failures) that are presented in video games may be an ideal application of uses and gratifications. Recent studies applying uses and gratifications to video games have also sought differences in motivations between genders (Jansz, Avis, & Vosmeer, 2010; Lucas & Sherry, 2004).

**Cultivation Theory**

Research concerning cultivation theory has primarily focused on television and other medias’ effects on society, suggesting that “media consumption ‘cultivates’ in us a distorted perception of the world we live in, making it seem more like television portrays it, than it is in
real life” (quoted in Ivy & Backlund, 2008, p. 99). Television has been found so universally appealing and influential because of “[i]ts drama, commercials, news, and other programs bring a relatively coherent system of messages into every home….Transcending historic barriers of literacy and mobility, television has become the primary source of socialization and everyday information (mostly in the form of entertainment) of otherwise heterogeneous populations” (quoted in Williams, 2006, p. 70).

With the prevalence of media today, research has sought to discover if the violence depicted in media affects violence in reality. While previous research has mostly focused on television portrayals of violence, “worried that all-too-receptive young viewers will imitate aggression on the screen” (Griffin, 2009, p. 349), the onset of video games and their widespread depiction of violence has also brought about concerns. One of the challenges of studying cultivation theory in regards to video games (and in general) is the wide variety of content and the generalizability of research findings (Williams, 2006). Williams’ (2006) study states, “The online database www.allgame.com lists descriptions of 35,400 different games across 93 different game machines plus computers. To collapse this wide variety of content and context into a variable labeled ‘game play’ is the equivalent of assuming that all television, radio, or motion picture use is the same” (p. 70). One particular difference between television viewing and video gaming is the level of involvement and activity; video games are sites of social interaction both face to face and online, and game content is often driven as much by the game design as by player interaction (whether the play is interacting within the game world, or with other players in and out of the game world) (Williams, 2006).

In addition to the much-studied effects of violence in the media, research has also sought to discover what other attitudes media cultivates in those who consume it. Other effects include
fear in/of society (as mentioned in Griffin, 2009), attitudes towards women and minorities, and gender effects.

**Video Games and Gender**

While there are numerous approaches to video games and their effects on society today, I will focus specifically on different aspects of video games and gender. What is the range of genders depicted in video games today? What effects does gender representation in video games have on children as well as adult players? How does game content affect each gender? What differences in game play exist between genders? How do players represent their gender when playing video games?

**Gender Representation in Video Games**

Video games have long been known as a male-dominated media, including in the terms of market audience, player base, and character representation in game. Research concerning gender representation in video games often focuses on a few key points of how men and women are depicted differently: frequency and playability (ability to play a male character versus a female character), physical abilities, role in the game, and physical representation (in terms of body, attire, etc) (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009; Robinson, Callister, Clark, & Phillips, 2008; Miller, & Summers, 2007; Jansz, & Martis, 2007; Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007; Ivory, 2006). Content analysis concerning video games and gender is performed based on a variety of aspects, including magazine reviews (Miller & Summers, 2007), video game covers (Burgess, et al., 2007), online reviews and official game websites (Ivory, 2006; Robinson et al., 2008), introductory films in video games (Jansz & Martis, 2007), and video game play itself (Williams et al., 2009). Some studies focused on games solely for console platforms (Playstation,
Video Games and Gender

Xbox, etc.) (Miller & Summers, 2007; Burgess et al., 2007; Jansz & Martis, 2007), while others included both console and PC games (Williams et. al., 2009; Ivory, 2006). A common system used to determine sampling is to find the most popular games on the market, either through market research, game store offerings, or through well-known game review websites such as Gamespot.com (Williams et. al, 2009; Robinson et. al, 2008; Burgess et al., 2007; Ivory, 2006). Miller and Summers’ (2007) study chose their sample of magazines (Xbox, Playstation, and Nintendo Power) because they were actually published by console companies and may generally be considered as “authorities”, while Jansz and Martis (2007) excluded sports games, racing games, and fighting games due to their lack of character development and developed selection criteria based on character representation (male, female, minority) and story line.

Findings for gender representation in video games generally support past findings in that males are significantly more represented than females (Williams et al., 2009; Robinson et al., 2008; Miller & Summers, 2007; Burgess et al., 2007; Ivory, 2006). Ivory’s (2006) research on video game reviews found that, while “75%...of the reviews mentioned male characters, only 42%...mentioned female characters in any capacity” (p. 109). Miller and Summers (2007) found that, “Of the 49 games included in the analysis, 282 male humans and 53 female human characters appeared, indicating 1 female for every 5.3 male characters” (p. 737). Along the same lines, Burgess et al. (2007) found that “[m]ales were twice as likely to appear on covers as females were” (p. 423); following that, their sample examined 381 male characters compared to only 104 female characters. Robinson et al.’s (2008) study on video game websites also supported this trend, finding that “male characters outnumbered female characters 3 to 1 (577 male characters to 196 female characters).” More recently, Williams et al. (2009) found that “male characters are vastly more likely to appear than female character [sic] in general. The
overall difference of 85.23/14.77 percent is also a large contrast with the 50.9/49.1 percent distribution in the actual population” (p. 824). While the trend seems that men are continuing to outnumber women in character representation in game, Jansz and Martis’ (2007) results “seem to indicate that the number of female characters in recent games is far larger than it was in earlier games” (p. 146). Their results may have been biased “toward a higher prevalence of female characters”, however, “because [they] did not draw a random sample but deliberately selected popular games with a diverse cast of characters” (p. 146).

Studies also found that males were often more playable than female characters, with research focusing on “[a]gency…as a function of character role: was the character considered the primary character and central to the game or simply an ancillary character without a clear cut contribution to the game? ” (Burgess et al., 2007, p. 424) or another similar form. Ivory (2006) found that “65%...of the reviews indicated male playable characters, whereas only 22%...mentioned female playable characters” (p. 110). Burgess et al. (2007) found that “[m]ales were almost five times more likely to be portrayed as the primary character…than females” (p. 424-425). Miller and Summers (2007) found that “males were heroes 58.1% of the time, significantly more than females (34.6%)” (p. 738). In addition, of games where the gender of characters was known, “in 51% of the games, men were playable, in 26.5% of the games females were playable and 10.2% of the games allowed the player to choose to play as either the male or female” (Miller & Summers, 2007, p. 738). Robinson et al. (2008) make an important note about games that provide the ability to choose character gender representation, “[e]ven for games where players could pick the character's gender (e.g., The Sims 2 and Guild Wars), there were still more male characters (60%) than female characters (40%) on the Web site.” Recently, Williams et al. (2009) also support the higher frequency of male playability,
This difference is heightened among the primary ‘doer’ characters, where males are even more likely to appear. As a general rule then, males appear more frequently in games than females, and even more so as drivers of the action. When females do appear, they are more likely to be in secondary roles than primary ones. (p. 824)

Concerning men and women in passive roles, conclusions are mixed. Studies have found little difference in men and women as passive characters (8% versus 9%, respectively) (Ivory, 2006), males being “four times more likely to be portrayed as ancillary characters” (Burgess et al., 2007, p. 425), and that “14.5% of males were supplemental characters, a significantly lower amount than females (30.8%)” (Miller & Summers, 2007, p. 738).

Burgess et al. (2007) made an interesting hypothesis, that females would be more likely to share their primary status with a primary male. Even with a primary female character, the presence of a primary male implied that the female was only allowed to be an important part of the game because the male was there with her. The male could serve as protector, guide, or actually perform most of the action while the female serves as a sidekick. (p. 425)

Their research supported this, finding that the amount of primary female characters paired with a male primary character was significantly higher than the proportion of primary males paired with primary females. Concerning characters sharing the primary spotlight, “20 games had more than one primary male while only one game had more than one primary female” (p. 425).

Furthermore, “while only one primary male was portrayed sharing the spotlight with two primary females, 20%...of the primary females were portrayed with two primary males” (p. 425).

Differing from typical results, Jansz and Martis (2007) found that “[w]omen and men were distributed equally in the class of leading characters (six women and six men) and women occupied a dominant position as often as men did” (p. 147). Their results also found “no
submissive female characters at all. Women in [their] set of 12 games were equal to men, or they dominated them. This contrasts with the presence of submissive female characters in all other studies” (p. 147). A prime example in their research of this strong, competent, dominant female (they term it the ‘Lara phenomenon’), is “Jennifer in Primal, who must embark on a journey to rescue her boyfriend Lewis, [who] illustrates that men in contemporary video games can be victims who must be saved by a female character” (p. 146).

Regardless of primary or supporting role, research continues to support previous findings that women are portrayed in a sexualized manner more often than men. Ivory (2006) notes that, “Though female characters were underrepresented overall, their attractiveness and sexuality were mentioned in proportionally more reviews than that of males” (p. 110). Further support was found in males being represented as more muscular, while women were more sexy (Miller & Summers, 2007; Jansz & Martis, 2007). Sexiness was generally illustrated via physical build and attire. Females’ clothing was more revealing (either by less or tighter clothing) overall (Miller & Summers, 2007; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Robinson et al., 2008). Burgess et al. (2008) make an interesting observation in that, when character bodies were portrayed as pieces, “84% of female characters…were fragmented using artificial means (e.g., just drawing the legs and buttocks) as opposed to environmental factors (e.g., legs being unobservable when riding in a car) compared to 55% of male characters” (p. 425). Robinson et al. (2008) noted that, “Fifteen percent of (M)ature games also included characters that were coded as being naked or having exposed breasts, buttocks, or genitals. Of the characters coded as ‘naked,’ 88% were female.” Females are also often portrayed with large breasts (Jansz & Martis, 2007; Burgess et al., 2008). Jansz and Martis (2007) noted that, “Buttocks also were difficult to ignore. They were particularly emphasized among female characters…(77%), but about 25% of the male characters also
appeared with eye catching behinds” (p. 146). Another observation in Jansz and Martis’ (2007) study was that there are exceptions to the feminine standard of sexy attire: “The male figure Dante (Devil May Cry 2), for example, was presented in an explicit, sexy, and seductive outfit’’ (p. 146).

A content analysis of female bodies by Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, (2009) revealed that video game depictions in general all feature larger heads than in reality. Their results suggest that the more realistic the imagery in a game, the smaller the female characters’ chest, waist, and hips, and the more they conform to the “thin-ideal seen in other media” (p. 830).

A study I found of particular interest was Ewan Kirkland’s (2005) analysis of the game series Silent Hill (SH). Kirkland’s introduction to the game in regards to gender, sexuality, and race cites a common formula that includes “the sexualized depiction of female characters, the overwhelming masculinity of the implied game player, and the recurring structure of male heroes rescuing helpless females” (p. 173). Following lines I’ve mentioned previously of female characters depicted sexually regardless of type of role, Kirkland provides the example of Princess Toadstool from the popular Super Mario Bros. series. She has the ability to float, which her accompanying characters do not; this “compatibility of Princess’ abilities with traditional constructions of femininity as dainty, ethereal and light/slender deserves acknowledgement” (p. 173). Moving onto the analysis of Silent Hill itself, Kirkland describes how the series “both conforms to and complicates this formula (cited above)” (p. 173). Another example that parallels that of Princess Toadstool is the SH character Eileen. She is paired with a male character, Henry, and, “[w]hile undeniably a rescue-figure, Eileen does join in combat, although her chosen weapons of handbag and riding crop to Henry’s revolver and baseball bat are as markedly
feminine as Princess’ graceful gliding” (p. 173-174). *Silent Hill*’s characters continue to complicate the formula of the sexualized female through “Heather, *SH3*’s central character, [who] also differs from video games’ predominantly fetishized femininity in her androgynous appearance and narrative centrality” (p. 174); the formula of the masculine male is complicated as well: “Harry’s fatherhood, James’ husband-hood, and Henry’s imprisonment within his apartment, domesticate, feminize and distinguish these male characters from other more hyper-masculine video game heroes” (p.174).

What may be considered another complication, or perhaps extension, of the sexualized female in the formula mentioned by Kirkland is an observation made by Burgess et al. (2007). Not every game portrays characters with an observable gender, nor is every game character human, though they may be humanoid in nature. One example of a game that portrays humanoid characters is *Conker: Reloaded*, where characters are squirrels playing the role of soldiers (Burgess et al., 2007). On the cover of the game was a “male squirrel straddling a large, smoking cannon and holding additional weapons clearly indicating an active role. The female squirrel is shown stroking the cannon in a suggestive way; although she is holding a bloody weapon, her fighting role was minimized relative to that as a sexy, supportive cheerleader” (Burgess et al., 2007, p. 423). This observation is particularly important, as noted by Burgess et al. (2007): “Perhaps one of the most bizarre aspects of this cover, and others like it, was the notion of sexy squirrels; the blatant hyper sexuality of female characters was so prevalent that it even spread to small rodents” (p. 423).

One question that may arise concerning the portrayals of gender roles in video games is that of ethical responsibility. As mentioned in Williams et al.’s (2009) virtual census, video game character representations do not accurately reflect American society today; instead there is a mix
of over- and under- representation in gender, race, and age. An article by Mike Doolittle of GameCritics.com (2009) asks the question, “Are game developers ethically responsible for gender roles in games?” This is quite obviously a heated topic, especially considering the 30 pages of comments. Another question found in Doolittle’s (2009) article and its subsequent comments is: Is the representation of genders in video games artistic expression, or is it driven by company executives and bottom lines?

In my research, I have found that gender representations are simply analyzed and there is little to no mention of game developers’ reasons for their portrayals of gender. Per this, I have sent out an e-mail to Blizzard Entertainment asking why they portray their characters as they do. Their games include a range of gender portrayals, from the female protagonist-turned-antagonist Kerrigan in Starcraft; the male protagonist-turned-antagonist Arthas in the Warcraft series and its massively multiplayer online (MMO) offspring, World of Warcraft (WoW); and the character choice between multiple strong, competent males and females in Diablo. WoW also features a host of other male authority figures, with two female counterparts (one is strong-willed, while the other is shown as powerful but emotional and dainty in comparison). One of the stronger appeals found in WoW, that may also be true of other role-playing games, is the player’s choice regarding their avatar (character); WoW allows players equal choice in gender, race, and physical features. Another popular MMO, Age of Conan, offers similar choices, though all their characters are humans (WoW has multiple humanoid races). While I may receive no response during the time of this writing, or at all, looking at why developers portray characters as they do may be as important as the effects of these representations.
Video Game Effects on Gender

Video games, along with traditional media, are often criticized for their negative, and often violent, effects on those who play them. Studies over the years have tested to see if video games do, indeed, cultivate violence and aggression in those who play them. Results have been mixed, finding that video games increase aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Carnagey & Anderson, 2005), increase male aggression but not female (Shibuya, Sakomoto, Ihori, & Yukawa, 2008), and no link between aggression and video games (Williams & Skoric, 2005; Ferguson, 2007). Part of the challenge, as mentioned earlier, in studying cultivation effects in video games is their broad range of genres. Other aspects that make it a challenge include games’ realism, and that many games largely depend on interactivity with the game world and characters (both computer and player controlled).

Supporting the idea that violent video games increase aggression is the meta-analysis performed by Anderson and Bushman (2001), in which they coded for aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Their results may be seen as alarming or frightening, considering “every theoretical prediction derived from prior research and from GAM [General Aggression Model] was supported by the meta-analysis of currently available research on violent video games” (Anderson & Bushman, 2001, p. 358). These supported predictions were that exposure to violent video games is “positively associated with heightened levels of aggression in young adults and children [46% of coded participants were under 18]…and in males and females” (Anderson & Bushman, p. 358). Possibly even more alarming is the statement, “these results clearly support the hypothesis that exposure to violent video games poses a public-health threat to children and youths, including college-age individuals” (Anderson & Bushman, 2001, p. 358). Further support for the video game-aggression link is found in Carnagey and Anderson’s (2005) study, who
found that “rewarding game violence increases game violence” and that “people who play a video game in which violent actions are rewarded exhibit increased aggressive behavior” (p. 887). This may seem intuitive, considering that the goal in many games is inherently tied to violence, but their study also found that

- playing a violent video game, regardless of whether the game rewards or punishes violence, increases aggressive affect relative to playing a nonviolent video game. However...
- playing a game in which violent actions are punished does not produce significantly more (or less) aggressive thought or behavior than playing a nonviolent version of the same game (p. 887).

In Brenick, Henning, Killen, O’Connor, and Collins (2007), they note that “On one hand, all participants, male and female, viewed violent images of males’ aggressive behavior and sexually exploitive images of females’ attire and poses as wrong because of the negative influences that these images can have on players’ attitudes and behavior” (p. 411). Brenick et. al also observe that “participants’ notions about how video game playing influences attitudes and behavior were fairly literal—that is, participants stated that video game playing has little negative effect on players’ attitudes because players do not often directly copy or imitate the behavior observed (e.g., “Playing is okay because it’s not like he’s going to go out and shoot someone tomorrow.”)” (p. 411-412). Their results present an interesting contradiction to participants’ notions: “males were less likely than females to view the violent game as negative or as having a negative consequence on players’ behavior and attitudes” and that “individuals who play video games with high frequency, particularly males, were more likely to condone negative stereotypic images, to be less critical of negative images, and to view that game content should not change than were individuals who play video games with low frequency” (Brenick et. al, 2007, p. 412). Their findings are important to note because, aside from increasing aggression
in high-frequency players, they may “also be more accepting of such increases in aggression” (Brenick et al., 2007, p. 412).

Contradicting these findings is Williams and Skoric’s (2005) study, who found no link between video game play and aggressive thoughts and behaviors. Their study also took into account time played and the participants’ preference for graphic violence, neither of which significantly affected their results (Williams & Skoric, 2005). They do note, however, that their results “[suggest] that older participants in the experimental group were perhaps more strongly influenced by game play and argued with friends more than their younger counterparts” (Williams & Skoric, 2005, p. 226). They provide possible explanations, citing that “the effects may stem simply from age,” or that they may stem from being part of a generation that did not spend a large portion of its youth playing video games. While not disputing that adults’ cognitive structures are less prone to change than children’s, it is also possible that a video-game experience may be more intense and overwhelming for Baby Boomers than it would be for their younger counterparts 10–20 years from now (p. 230).

Williams and Skoric (2005) also address the previous finding that short-term exposure to violent video games causes an increase in aggression, however temporary (as mentioned in Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Video game-aggression research has been found lacking in longitudinal studies; Williams and Skoric (2005), through their one month longitudinal study, ask “What happens when players participate in video-game violence for longer than 1 or 2 hours?” to which they reply, “Our study duration of 1 month is the longest by far to date, and so offers new insight into the duration of effects. If the effects of some games wear out after an hour, and disappear (or remain very small) after a month, the duration of strong effects becomes suspect” (p. 230).
Furthering the findings of no link between video games and aggression is Ferguson’s (2007) meta-analysis. However, besides supporting the nonexistent link between video games and aggression, Ferguson (2007) points out that findings supporting the video game-aggression link are often heavily biased, and that there are also positive findings to look at as well as the heavily-studied negatives.

One example of mixed results is Shibuya et al.’s (2008) one year longitudinal study, who found significant gender differences in their 5th-to-6th grade participants. Their study found that “playing violent video games increases hostility for boys but not for girls,” with reasons being that “boys are more likely to be exposed to violent video games than girls are” and “[g]irls are more likely than boys to perceive violent scenes critically, and exposure to particular contexts of violent scenes is likely to make girls less aggressive than boys” (p. 536). Further male-increase/female-decrease differences were found in the variables of attractive perpetrators (who are more likely to be male), possibly because “girls may not identify with attractive male perpetrators;” and justification of violence, which “often involves prosocial features (e.g., protecting society or others), which might affect girls more powerfully than boys, helping to strengthen their normative structure about violence” (p. 537). Other increasers of aggression in boys were “[i]nteractivity[, which] is likely to weaken the antiviolence norm for boys” and “unjustified violence and depicted pain or indication of harm, as consequences of violence” (Shibuya et al., 2008, p. 536). Furthermore, they identified “[c]lose-ups, blood or gore (graphicness), reality, and rewards [as] likely to increase aggression” (Shibuya et al., 2008, p. 536). Shibuya et al.’s (2008) study also identified possible decreasers of aggression, citing that “humor might distract player attention from violence by inducing emotions incompatible
with aggression and so facilitate players’ interpreting violence as fictional or unrealistic behavior” (p. 536). The extent of violence in games may decrease aggression in girls, especially multiplayer games, possibly because “[t]hese real social interactions among peers might help reduce aggressive behavior in a real setting. Extensive violence might also be easily perceived by players as being socially unacceptable, especially for girls” (Shibuya et. al, 2008, p. 536). Lastly, role-playing is likely to decrease aggression in girls because of the possible prosocial features of naming and building characters: “Players often control multiple characters with different strengths and weaknesses, and so children might learn cooperation and the importance of others through role-playing games” (Shibuya et. al, 2008, p. 536). One point to note, however, is that Shibuya et. al’s (2008) study was conducted in Japan, and what may be true of another culture may or may not be true of American culture.

There have also been studies performed specifically on the under-represented female population in regards to violent video games. Kamala Norris (2004) focused on differences between women, comparing those who played computer games and those who used the computer but did not play computer games. Norris (2004) found that “women who play computer games at home have higher aggression scores than women who do not play computer games” (p. 723), and also found that “[h]aving an aggressive personality was related to gaming behavior. Women who played games, played them longer, or played games for more mature audiences were more aggressive. In particular, differences were found in levels of anger, physical aggression, and verbal aggression, but not in hostility” (p. 725). Another finding of interest is that “women who use the computer to play games experience less sexual harassment online than those who do not, but they find less friendship online the more they play” (Norris, 2004, p. 725). Possible explanations for these possibly contradictory results were that women who experienced sexual
harassment did not return, that women who play computer games are more technologically skilled or familiar with online environments and thus are better able to avoid harassment and find friends, or that some women simply aren’t seeking friendships through gameplay (Norris, 2004). Norris (2004) also noted that “[w]omen whose favorite game was for a more mature audience also experienced less sexual harassment online, but in addition reported a more friendly online environment than women whose favorite game was for a less mature audience,” with possible explanations being, “[w]omen who play more mature games may be avoiding sexual harassment by making friends with other people online, or there may be a different online culture in more mature games [intended for those 17 and older]” (p. 725). Personal experience would support both explanations in regards to playing more mature games, and I would consider this especially true of MMO’s, where many aspects of the game are driven by social interaction. Most of the people I play with in WoW are in their late teens or early twenties, with many members 30 and older; considering the primary social unit in the game is the guild (which may consist of a group of players anywhere from a small handful to a hundred or more players), and that guild members are required to work together to advance in the game, it makes sense that close bonds and friendly environments would be formed. That isn’t to say that sexual harassment doesn’t exist, though.

Another study that focused on women was Matthew Eastin’s (2006) analysis on female violence based on avatar gender, opponent gender and type (human versus computer player). Eastin (2006) found that women playing female characters experienced greater aggression compared to when they were playing male characters, and that playing against a human opponent regardless of player avatar also increased aggression. Other results of interest were that when females played against both male human opponents or male computer avatars, aggression
increased, and that females playing a male character experienced increased aggression against male computer agents, but decreased if the computer opponent was female (Eastin, 2006). A possible explanation for why females playing male characters are less aggressive toward female characters is that “when playing with a male avatar, female players conform to social values that inhibit aggression toward women” (Eastin, 2006, p. 359). Why is female aggression increased against human opponents, especially male? Perhaps it is the natural feeling of competition, or perhaps it is that females feel the need to be more masculine in a traditionally masculine setting.

While violence in video games has been widely studied, what other effects do video games cultivate? Addressing this is research that has focused on the blatant sexuality found in many video games. Returning to Brenick et al.’s (2007) study, they also found that “males [are] less critical of stereotypes than females and…female stereotypic images [are] viewed more positively by male participants than by female participants” (p. 414). Recently, Yao, Mahood, and Linz (2010) investigated “the tendency for sexual thoughts, increased accessibility of negative female stereotypes, and a self-reported behavioral tendency to engage in sexual harassment [in males 18-47] as a result of playing a sexually-oriented video game portraying women as sex objects” (p. 85). As Yao et al. (2010) predicted, playing sexually-oriented video games significantly decreased male reaction times towards sexual words and words that sexually objectified women compared to neutral and non-objectifying words, they state that “this is clear evidence that playing a sexually-oriented video game primes sex-related thoughts and increases accessibility to a negative gender schema of the female sex” (p. 85). Additionally, they found “playing a sexually-charged video game for merely 25 minutes might increase a self-reported tendency to engage in inappropriate sexual advances” (Yao et. al, 2010, p. 85).

Focusing on the effects of technology, including video game use, on youths, Jackson,
Yong, Witt, Fitzgerald, von Eye, and Harold (2009) found that “[b]oys, regardless of race, played video games far more than did girls” (p. 440). More importantly, they found that “[v]ideo game playing was associated with a lower behavioral self-concept and lower self-esteem” (Jackson et. al, 2009, p. 440). These negative findings open the question as to why video games negatively affect self-concept and self-esteem in youths; is it due to the highly sexualized nature and body image ideals that kids are unable to match? Is it that kids do not have the same powers and abilities as their video game counterparts do?

Despite the numerous studies surrounding the negative effects of video games, there has been some focus on the positive aspects of video game playing. Olson, Kutner, and Warner (2008) found a variety of positive effects that video game playing had on boys: “playing realistic sports games influenced the amount and variety of their physical activity,” “given the role of video game play in starting and maintaining friendships, there is potential for games to help socially awkward children gain acceptance and self-esteem,” and, “particularly for role-playing games, [boys reported] motivation and encouragement to think creatively to solve problems” (p. 70). Given the social aspects of video game play, both face-to-face and online, it seems intuitive that video games may affect social abilities positively and provide other instances for players of any age to learn or maintain social norms. One highly social example are MMO’s (Massively Multiplayer Online games), where players often must cooperate with one another to achieve common goals, advance their characters, and advance through the game. Another social example of gaming are LAN (Local Access Network) events where players will bring their computers to a designated location to play online and face-to-face.

Social aspects aside, research has also found that video game play can affect visuospatial cognition and mental rotation skills (Ferguson, 2007; Cherney, 2008). Ferguson’s (2007) meta-
analysis notes that playing violent video games increases visuospatial cognition, which provides an opportunity to use video games for their positive effects, such as in education. One of the games in Ferguson’s (2007) meta-analysis, Re-Mission, “has been demonstrated to lead to greater treatment adherence, quality of life, cancer knowledge and self-efficacy in youths with cancer who were randomized to play the game in comparison to youths who did not play the game” (p. 315). The study by Cherney (2008) mentions cognitive gender differences, and that “women perform better on verbal tests, whereas men demonstrate greater visuospatial capabilities,” and that men also “typically outperform females on certain tests of mental rotation… and spatial perception” (p. 776). Cherney’s (2008) results demonstrate that “even a very brief practice [4 hours] in computer game play does improve performance on mental rotation measures. In general, practice with computer games improved both men’s and women’s performance, but women’s gains were significantly greater than men’s” (p. 783). Furthermore, Cherney (2008) states, “Although women’s gains were larger than men’s, their posttest scores did not reach the level of men’s scores. Thus, men benefited from practice as well” (p. 783). To help close this gap, Cherney (2008) found that “[p]laying an action video game for 10 [hours] eliminated gender differences in spatial attention and also decreased the gender difference in mental rotation ability whereas playing a non-action game did not eliminate the gender difference” (p. 784).

After researching the positive and negative effects of video games, I find myself drawn to the positive social effects the most. I can attest to the high socialization factors that online gaming can provide; considering that I attended seven schools all over California and even in Guam throughout my K-12 education, I can say that having the ability to log onto a game and socialize with pre-existing friends in a familiar environment helped make transitions easier. It
may also be important to note that a small handful of those friendships still exist today. This isn’t to say that I haven’t been affected negatively by video games such as acceptance of stereotypes or wanting to match the large-busted thin-ideal portrayed in them, but it might be hard to measure in oneself. The current culture in America is certainly highly focused on media consumption that abounds with sex and violence, especially in video games, but this also opens up the discussion that there is such a broad range of games available, and findings may not be generalizable to all games, or even to multiple genres.

**Differences in Game Play**

There is no question of the popularity of video games and how ingrained they have become, not only in American culture, but others as well (for example, gaming is essentially a national sport in South Korea). What makes them so appealing? As Yee (2006) puts it, “different people choose to play games for very different reasons, and thus, the same video game may have very different meanings or consequences for different players” (p. 774). Indeed, Royse, Joon, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo (2007) found that technologically-savvy women who game regularly (3-10+ hours a week) “reported that they actively choose specific genres to fulfill their desires for particular pleasures…” (p. 563). Research has supported the known idea that males play video games more than females (Bonanno & Kommers, 2005; Ogletree & Drake, 2007; Winn & Heeter, 2009; Padilla-Walker, Nelson, Carroll, & Jensen, 2010), but females are a growing group of gamers, increasing in 2009, especially on console systems (NPD 2009, Jun 29).

Motivations for gaming have been broken down into different categories for different studies, but they can generally be broken down into the categories of achievement (gaining
power, competition, character optimization through game mechanics), social aspects (socializing, relationships, teamwork), and immersion (discovery, role-playing, character customization, escapism) (Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Yee, 2006; Jansz et al., 2010).

A study by Olson et al. (2008) explored boys’ uses of video games, finding that boys use violent video games “as a means to express fantasies of power and glory,” “to explore and master what they perceived as exciting and realistic environments,” and “as a tool to work out their feelings of anger and stress” (p. 69). They also found that “[a] substantial number of girls also used games to cope with anger (29%) and other emotions” (Olson et al., 2008, p. 71).

Boys also utilize violent or sports games as social tools that allow for socialization through competition and cooperation (Olson et al., 2008). Furthering the idea of video games as sources for socialization is the previously mentioned example of LAN events, another male-dominated domain, whose “foremost gratifying property” is “[t]he possibility to game in each other’s presence…. Apparently, actual face-to-face presence at a LAN event is more gratifying than online gaming on the internet at home” (Jansz & Martens, 2005, p. 349). A result of particular interest was found in Yee (2006), “there is a gender difference in the relationship [motivation to play] but not in the socializing [motivation to play], although these two… are highly related. In other words, male players socialize just as much as female players, but are looking for very different things in those relationships” (p. 774).

Though LAN gamers are primarily male, one of the main motivating factors for females to game is also social. A study of young German women performed by Hartmann and Klimmt (2006) found that “women prefer rich social interactions in computer games… and [they] also… dislike… violent content and heavy gender-stereotyping in the presentation of characters” (p. 925). However, finding that “the relative importance of social interaction was much higher than
the relevance of gender role stereotyping and violence in the game,“ some women are willing to overlook gender stereotyping to “experience enjoyment on some dimensions” (Hartmann & Klimmt, p. 919-920). There is another side in motivation (or de-motivation) to play games that employ sexualized gender stereotypes, which may be turned around and seen as a way “to enact new definitions of the gendered self” (Royse et al., 2007, p. 565).

Royse et al.’s (2007) study focused on women and their levels of technology integration and gaming time, finding that women who played 3-10+ hours a week (power gamers), were the most technologically-savvy and actively chose particular genres or games to fulfill their current desire. Power gamers are more motivated by and enjoy the aspect of challenge, where “[c]ompetition provides an arena in which power gamers are able to define and extend their definitions of self and gender” (Royse et al., 2007, p. 563) through “game combat…a space which permits them to challenge gender norms by exploring and testing their aggressive potentiality” (p. 564). For these power gamers,

digital games are not a problematic technology. Even as they themselves admit to the hypersexualization of some female images in games and the sexism of some male players, they have defined games successfully for themselves as being about pleasure, mastery and control. Technology here is not a problem but an integral part of life (Royse et al., 2007, p. 564)

Instead of degrading pleasure for these women, many may choose characters that are both sexy and strong, combining femininity and masculinity (Royse et al., 2007). One of the women they interviewed puts it as, “When I create a character in an RPG, I like to make them as sexy as possible. Haha! I love a sexy and strong female character. A character who is sexy and strong and can still kick a guy’s butt 10 ways to Sunday!” (quoted in Royse et al., 2007, p. 564). For moderate women gamers (1-3 hours a week, control is also a motivation for play, but it is
different from power gamers, “[w]hereas control for power gamers relates to the characters that they use to explore new definitions of gender and self, for moderate gamers, control is largely environmental” (Royse et al., 2007, p. 566). These moderate gamers also cite one motivation is distraction or escapism, which may be seen as a form of self-control, “a way to cope with the demands of women’s daily lives” (Royse et al., 2007, p. 566). Interestingly, female power gamers see gaming as a way to expand their gender identity, whereas moderate female gamers still see the gaming culture as primarily masculine domain and their gender is thusly outside of it (Royse et al., 2007).

Bonanno and Kommers’ (2005) study on Maltese men and women found a “high percentage of females opting for puzzle, adventure, fighting, and managerial games” that indicates “females’ top reasons for playing include challenge and arousal” (p. 36). They also found that “males’ preference for first person shooters, roleplaying games, and sport and strategy games indicates gratification of different needs – challenge and social interaction” (Bonanno & Kommers, 2005, p. 36). Their study identifies possible underlying reasons for these preferences:

The preferred games of females capitalise on their natural propensities and skills such as perceptual speed, fine motor skills, and sequenced hand movements (Watson & Kimura, 1991). Games preferred by males demand a higher visuospatial ability involving localisation, orientation, mental rotation, target-directed motor skills, greater reaction speed, increased aggression, and greater risk taking (Bonanno & Kommers, 2005, p. 36).

Returning to the fact that men play video games more frequently than women, this difference has often been cited to lead to or exacerbate relationship problems. In Knox, Zusman, White, and Haskins’ (2009) study they found that women are much more likely to have a partner who played video games compared to men having a female partner who played (75% and 42%, respectively). As a female power gamer involved in a relationship with another male power
gamer, I find that both of us are rarely upset by the other’s frequent game play (though sharing a computer can be challenging). Both of us play *WoW*, and I’ve found that this not only provides what some people call “quality-” or “couples’-time,” but it and other games also help to identify and develop a common interest. As a power gamer, technology and gaming are completely integrated into my life. I also identify with Royse et al.’s (2007) findings that competition in games, or even gaming in general, has provided me an opportunity to expand my gender identity starting from a young age. While I disprove of degrading sexual representations of women in games, instead of shrinking from that, I want to challenge and change that idea. Instead of viewing sexualized women as weak or unintelligent, I want my avatars (and myself) to both look sexy and be powerful.

**Gender Representation by Players**

While video games have been a male-dominated media, the number of female gamers is on the rise, but what does this mean about the ideas and personal representations of gender? Games themselves are gendered: shooting games are considered more masculine than MMO’s or puzzle games (Eden, Bowman, & Maloney, 2009), games with cute avatars or bright graphics are intended for children or females, and even characters within games are gendered, female and cuddly characters intended for females, with muscular men intended for males. Considering that video games are still considered more masculine, unknown players in traditionally masculine genres are automatically assumed to be men, and skill in games lends masculinity to the skilled player, even if the gender of that player is unknown (Eden et al., 2009).

Women face a challenge when playing video games in that they may feel the need to display femininity even while taking part in this generally masculine practice. Multiple studies
have been performed regarding this behavior, on both the young and adult. Valerie Walkerdine (2006) studied interactions between young girls while they played a variety of games; she notes that girls favor cute or feminine characters, and what is noticeable about this is the characters’ “absence of or their ambiguous masculinity” (p. 523). Walkerdine (2006) posits that the rendering of a male avatar as cuddly “certainly cuts down the possibility of the girl as object of violence but at a very high price in that the male is rendered as unthreatening and childlike” (p. 524). A similar observation is made in some girls’ preference for femme fatale characters; this “double positioning as cute and powerful….is a useful way for a girl to resolve contradictions of femininity and masculinity” (Walkerdine, 2006, p. 524). Further observations are found in interactions during gameplay itself: Walkerdine (2006) observed a conversation between two girls, Rosie and Bella. While Bella is playing and Rosie is waiting for her turn, their conversation involves the both of them wanting to play, but asserting that they want the other girl to play with statements such as “I’ll let you have another go” and “No, it’s all right. I want you to” (Walkerdine, 2006, p. 525). Their covert power-play demonstrates the feminine ideas of cooperation, passivity, and friendliness: “they are required to disavow the desire for control, authority, and self-interest whilst simultaneously acting to achieve these things” (Walkerdine, 2006, p. 526). In other interactions with Bella, as well as other girls, Rosie often takes a passive role and portrays herself as “dumb” or incompetent, as well as scared, when playing games, “thus locating herself in her habitual “feminine” position of incompetence” (Walkerdine, 2006, p. 526). When the girls (Rosie, Bella, Jo, Gaby) in Walkerdine’s (2006) study were playing in a 4-player setting, each girl had their own position in the small social hierarchy, and the group as a whole appeared “cohesive, democratic and friendly” (p. 532); instead, power plays weren’t performed within the group, instead Bella competed with Jo via avatar “…within the game. This
allows for some power play that is legitimised by the activity of the game, but not obvious or confrontational within the social group" (Walkerdine, 2006, p. 531).

This challenge of being both feminine and masculine also extends to adult women. Helen Thornham’s (2008) study provides an example through the comments of Lorna:

Obviously it’s a football game and . . . for the boys . . . if I started playing the game, Joe would basically describe what to do, so he’d be like, “you’ve got to press that to do that de de, de de, de de.” ...I actually scored one of the best scores that he's ever seen anyone score in ISS (p. 131).

Lorna excludes herself from the game genre (football game for boys) and places herself as “subject to Joe’s instruction….In fact, her success is not only the result of Joe’s instruction, but her comments deny any competitiveness of gameplay or knowledge about the game” (Thornham, 2008, p. 131). Her comments “[enable] her to proclaim competency as a carefully constructed novice gamer who excels because of Joe’s instruction, while completely erasing any element of competitiveness or challenge to Joe’s ‘authority’” (Thornham, 2008, p. 131). Another woman, Rach, sums up one of the main differences during gameplay between masculinity and femininity: “When I sit next to Rob here and he’s gaming, I’m asking him questions. But when he’s sat next to me and I’m gaming, he’s telling me what to do” (Thornham, 2008, p. 138).

Embodying femininity while performing masculinity extends not only to social interactions face-to-face, but personal representation and online gaming. One example, Ivy from Royse et al.’s (2007) study, enjoyed shooting strangers with a rocket launcher, but still “adamantly asserted her femininity, which she marked by such feminine signs as long fingernails, which she referred to at several points in the interview…. [and that she] refuses to cut” (p. 564). My personal gender representation is markedly feminine with characteristics such as long hair and nails, and I certainly express masculinity in games. Advancement in Wow, like
Video Games and Gender 30

many games, is based on killing other people, humanoids, or creatures; I don’t believe I portray any qualms with this advancement through violence with myself (my avatar) as the instrument), however, I often express regret and sadness when innocent creatures (squirrels, sheep, etc) are caught in my wide-range attacks.

I believe that my personal experience would find that I embody the opposite of the traditional feminine passivity when gaming; my position as an officer in my guild warrants that I be more assertive and aggressive in order to handle my oftentimes rowdy subordinates. I also portray myself as more masculine in guild as a way to build and maintain relationships. This same behavior can be seen in another woman in guild, while at the same time, a third woman is quieter than either of us, but will assert herself when she feels strongly about an issue. To us, this masculinity is merely an adaptation and not seen as degrading; the men in guild can even be seen as helping or teaching us to be more masculine to overcome what is jokingly seen as a handicap. (Admittedly, I wonder if our joking about women as the lesser sex is preserving a sexist view, yet my position as an officer and the other women’s frequent topping of the damage meters clearly demonstrates our equality and competence as players.) One example of this masculine-teaching occurred when discussing the specifics of a particular boss: I interrupted a male player to correct his statement; when I found out that he was referring to a completely different aspect of the boss, I immediately withdrew and apologized. Addressing my traditional feminine response, another male said, “No, no, this is where you tell him: ‘No, you’re wrong.’” A second example demonstrating overcoming the “female handicap” happened with another woman: all of us had just died to a boss, and it was jokingly blamed on a male player. When he objected, she stated “You said I could have three free wipes [where everyone dies], cause I’m a girl, and I’m
melee.” Responding to that, our guild leader said, “I like how she doesn’t acknowledge the insult; she just takes the advantage and runs with it.”

My guild, and specifically myself as a female officer, is possibly facing an upset to this masculine/feminine balance with a new female player. My fear is that she is “one of those women” who flaunts that she is, indeed, a woman, what may be considered a rarity, and attempts to use that to engender herself to the rest of the primarily male guild. What is interesting, and relieving, is that I am not alone in these feelings. Bertozzi’s (2008) exploration into cross-gender competition in video games describes my current situation faced by other female gamers:

[A senior female WoW player] points out that women who have invested a great deal of time and energy in raising their ranking in Massively-Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games have done so generally through diligence, practice and careful construction of social relationships with other players. Hostility towards new female players does exist, but only if those females come into the game and attempt to circumvent the laborious process of earning status in the group through ‘serious’ gameplay. Some females come into the game and use heteronormative feminine wiles such as flirting and sexual innuendo to attempt to make progress in the game by bonding with higher ranked males. This kind of behavior is extremely irritating to experienced female players because it undercuts the idea that females can and should gain status by earning it, the same way males do (p. 483).

“Gender-bending” isn’t solely performed by (some) of the women in the guild; you can often find the men in the guild, both straight and homosexual, acting more traditionally feminine. The men in the guild are very open in verbally stating their affection for one another, especially in overtly sexual and homoerotic terms. I believe this blatant sexuality and homoeroticism is a way for men to cope with expressing affection (a feminine trait), but in a socially acceptable masculine way; one could say that they are embodying masculinity while practicing femininity.
Conclusions

Since their onset thirty years ago, video games have become an integrated and ubiquitous part of American and other cultures. While it is known, and well-supported, that video games are a male-dominated media, this may be changing. Perhaps in future games, the playable and supporting characters will more accurately represent the gender distribution, though I am not sure the masculine and feminine ideals of muscularity and an hourglass figure will be changing anytime soon. There is no current consensus on the negative effects of violent video games, but studies are expanding their focus to look at the effects of the blatant sexual representations, as well as the positive side, such as the effects on cognitive and social abilities. Men and women certainly have different preferences and motivations for playing video games, but video games themselves represent personal and different meanings to men, women, children, and adults. Video games also present a new arena of gender representation, where gamers may both consciously and unconsciously represent a particular or a mixing of genders.

The studies referred to this paper certainly are not comprehensive in the realm of video games and gender, and the area is constantly changing and evolving along with human society. One of the limitations of this paper is that it does not encompass all the differences, similarities, and effects that video games have when dealing with gender because of the broad range of video game genres and platforms themselves. Indeed, each genre or platform could provide multiple aspects to be studied. Another limitation may be that not all studies were performed among the American culture, but these other cultural sources do demonstrate the ubiquity and universal appeal and affect of video games. What may not have been explicitly stated, save for in the early parts of this paper, is that the highly interactive nature of video games presents a challenge that
traditional media do not. This interactivity may also be part of what makes video games appealing to so many people. It is certainly one of the reasons I love to game.

While each area focused on in this paper presents numerous opportunities for future study, I would like to explore the gender representation of players themselves. My heavy investment in gaming from a young age has certainly helped shape who I am, and will continue to have an influence on future evolution. One thing for certain is that I will continue to game, embodying the idea of femininity while practicing the attitudes and actions of masculinity.
References


