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In the article “The Effects of the Sexualization of Female Video Game Characters on Gender Stereotyping and Female Self-Concept”, Morawitz and Mastro explore the consequences of playing sexualized female characters in video games. Relying on Bandura’s (1999) social cognitive theory, Morawitz and Mastro consider video games to be a form of media that has the ability to influence attitudes toward and expectation of gender (810). Likening video games to television, Morawitz and Mastro deduce that new entertainment technologies will produce similar negative effects as the impact that television has on cognition and self-image (808). An experiment was conducted to measure the impact of non/sexualized content on self-esteem, self-efficacy, and gender attitudes.

A pilot study concluded that the game Tomb Raider: Legend would be best to use because the participants play as a female character that is displayed both sexually and non-sexually in different parts of the game (813). 328 undergraduate students completed questionnaires after playing the games for 30 thirty minutes with either a sexualized or non-sexualized character (815). No significant effect on self-esteem was found; they speculate that this could be due to the virtual female models strength and ability in the game, serving as a “positive effect on individuals’ attitudes toward women.” (812,817). Self-efficacy was only found to be negatively affected when compared to not playing at all (817). Gender expectations were the most affected, resulting in lowering expectations of females cognitive and physical capabilities, however this trend was noticeably weaker in the female’s participants (817-818).

In conclusion, sexualized women in video games proved to have less impact on the female psyche than originally believed. With no direct influence on self-esteem or self-efficacy the complete drawbacks of videogames remain inconclusive. The results of gender expectation are also arguable, and may be exaggerated since the chosen game was designed for male viewership. Using a video game that is more popular among female players would be more reflective of the gaming population. More on the issue of accuracy, participants were not screened for familiarity with video games, which could also prove useful for identifying individuals who may be more strongly influenced by the games content (821). Furthermore, as was stated by Morawitz and Mastro, the proportion of their sample who play video games regularly may not be representative of the common population (820).

As much as I would like to believe that the sexual imagery in video games has no major negative effect on personal perceptions, I do not believe this study is strong enough on its own to stand as definitive proof. More attention must be placed on replicating the female gaming experience rather than placing women in the male experience. I believe this issue would greatly benefit from a longitudinal study following individuals who will play video games. A long term study would provide a better examination of the real-world effects of sexual imagery in video games. Short term attitudinal data may not be reflective of actual life, but it is useful in that it gives direction to larger projects.

References

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