An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior[1]

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Using content analysis, this research examines the portrayal of women and the use of violent themes in a sample of 33 popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis video games. It is proposed that video games, like other media forms, impact the identity of children. This analysis reveals that traditional gender roles and violence are central to many games in the sample. There were no female characters in 41% of the games with characters. In 28% of these, women were portrayed as sex objects. Nearly 80% of the games included aggression or violence as part of the strategy or object. While 27% of the games contained socially acceptable aggression, nearly half included violence directed specifically at others and 21% depicted violence directed at women. Most of the characters in the games were Anglo.

Drawing upon symbolic interactionism, we find that individuals make sense of the world around them by using the meanings that the members of society have come to share. Individuals, like actors in a stage production, occupy particular roles. They "play" these roles according to society's norms, or expectations, for the particular role. However, while there are societal expectations about given roles, the rules for "playing" the role are not rigid. Rather, within the confines of the meaning attributed to a role by society, individuals develop "identities" that define what a particular role

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means to them. Thus, they are able to manipulate the way that they "play" a specific role. Children, too, manipulate and learn roles through childhood play. Play during childhood becomes an important component of socialization.

It is through the process of socialization that boys and girls are encouraged to adopt and develop certain personality traits that are often referred to as masculine and feminine. These personality traits, then, have an impact upon the roles that individuals assume (Freeman, 1985). The effect of television programs and advertisements upon the gender role expectations of both women and men has received considerable attention. However, as the popularity and accessibility of video games continues to increase, the question of the effect of the portrayal of women in video games upon gender role expectations as well as upon the use of violence arises. As Gamson, et al. (1992) argue, "a wide variety of media messages can act as teachers of values, ideologies, and beliefs and . . . can provide images for interpreting the world whether or not the designers are conscious of this intent." (p. 374). This paper illustrates that the video games that are being played by today's youth present an overwhelmingly traditional and negative portrayal of women and that the development of gender identities and expectations among youngsters may be affected by these portrayals. For example, girls may expect that they will continue to be victims and needy and that their responsibilities include maintaining beauty and sexual appeal while boys may determine that their role is to protect and defend women and to possessive them even through the use of violence.

Mead proposed that individual actors use the definitions of multiple roles, both their own and those of others, to interpret the interaction that takes place around them. Thus, boys and girls rely upon expectations about both masculinity and femininity to interpret interaction and to develop expectations for themselves and others. In turn, these expectations are further used to interpret subsequent interaction and situations. In fact, there must be a social agreement, more or less, about the definition of the role for interaction between individuals to even occur. Because roles are used to define the self, they become a point of reference for organizing and classifying the world and ultimately, as a basis for action (Mead, 1964). Thus, the roles internalized by the child, including gender, become for the child, and later for the adult, a basis for other roles and for action. Thus, the gender role that is internalized by the individual when she or he is young necessarily has a significant impact upon the perspective of that individual and the additional roles she or he assumes in later life.

And, while Mead (1934) contends that an individual develops an identity of self only as the result of taking the role of the other within a given situation, the individual will accept, reject or modify the identity formulated through this effort. Nevertheless, the identity will inevitably be contingent

upon what that individual defines as his or her role in the perspective of the society. Thus, it is argued that the development of gender role expectations is affected by the messages received from various agents of socialization in society.

The development of the self has great consequences for the individual. Individuals, in this case boys and girls, must organize their behavior based upon their interactions with others and these interactions conversely affect the development of the self. In other words, interaction with others enables children to constantly redefine roles and expectations. Thus, their concept of self is based in large measure on their interpretations of the interactions they have with others. The self that is developed through the on-going interactions is not unique to a given situation, but, instead affects the outcomes of subsequent situations (Kuhn, 1964). Thus, the gender identity that is established by the child has consequences for the rest of the statuses and identities of that individual.

Children actively attempt to define gender by using the occurrences they witness everyday (Ferree, 1990). As Mead (1934) contends, children play "at" something. Children pretend to be a mother, father, doctor, or nurse and in so doing they internalize the role and the gender identity associated with it because they are able to locate a definition of gender through the occurrence they witness. Moreover, in this process of defining gender, children will not only base their expectations on what they have learned through their interactions with others, they may also associate gender identity with gender symbols (like Barbie dolls) (Thorne, 1986). Thus, feminine symbols become part of the female child's identity as do masculine symbols become part of the male's identity. Thus, girls and boys, alike, may come to see Barbie and other symbols as the feminine norm. Likewise, Goffman (1979) argues that human displays, like gender advertisements, also play an important role in the development of gender expectations.

Technology is increasingly allowing individuals to identify the sex of their child well before birth. Consequently, gender role socialization begins even before birth through the way the parents talk to the fetus to the physical environment that is created prior to delivery. Quite often, these efforts represent traditional or stereotypical views of femininity and masculinity. For example, girls' rooms are often painted pink while boys' rooms are painted blue and even the toys and clothing purchased for the new infant reflect these same patterns—girls' clothes are frilly while boys' clothes, like Sears Toughskins, are made to handle their rough behavior. Boys get hard, tough toys such as trucks and baseball bats while girls receive soft, cuddly teddy bears and dolls with which they can practice and internalize their later life roles. The family, too, often supports the traditional gender roles requiring girls to perform feminine chores such as setting the table and

washing the dishes and boys performing masculine chores such as carrying out the garbage and helping with lawn work. Moreover, traditional gender identity is frequently supported by family, teachers and peers when they reward children for demonstrating appropriate gender behaviors (Fagot, 1984). It may be argued that language is the most important component of culture. And, as Adams and Ware (1989) suggest, even the English language, which sexualizes and trivializes women, becomes an important factor in creating the gender identities and expectations of boys and girls. This results in further internalization of gender role expectations. The mass media, although not always given the same degree of attention as other socialization agents like the family or the schools, has been accepted as agents of socialization as well. Milkie (1994) argues that media images play an important role in the socialization of youth.

The Mass Media and Gender Roles

In addition to the other agents of socialization, the mass media affects the child's definition of gender. The mass media continuously bombards the child with portrayals of men and women similar to those supported by the various institutions and socialization agents. Most of these portrayals of both males and females are characteristically stereotypical (Milkie, 1994; Durkin, 1985). Men are strong and work in jobs that require excessive amounts of physical strength or in areas that are traditionally occupied by intelligent, upper-middle class gentlemen, such as medicine, law, or finance. Men are characterized as either good guys or as bad ones and aggressive behavior is exhibited and expected in either of these roles (Milkie, 1994). At the same time, women are also depicted in stereotypical roles that are usually related to sexuality in which the woman focuses upon beauty or physical attractiveness or upon traditional family roles (Milkie, 1994). Women are to be, first and foremost, a wife and mother and possibly a teacher, waitress or secretary. Furthermore, advertisements typically depict men and women in traditional roles within the home. For example, men are usually trying to sell products pertaining to male activities, such as car wax, lawn mowers, and motor oil, while women are frequently recommending baby products or household cleaning aids. In cases where women or men are shown selling products that are not traditionally expected from them, the portrayal is often sarcastic in nature. Furthermore, news stories about women are rare or are about wives of important public figures, so professional women are infrequently presented as role models for girls or boys (Cantor, 1987).

Media portrayals of women are similar throughout other forms of mass media as well. In an analysis of popular music that was introduced over a

time frame of thirty years, Cooper (1985) concluded that there was a ten-
dency to describe women in terms of physical attributes or as evil, as posses-
sions of men, or as dependent upon men. Likewise, women's magazines
continue to emphasize the domestic responsibilities of women (Ruggerio &
Weston, 1985). Even magazines marketed toward young, professional women
tend to highlight beauty techniques and methods for attracting and keeping
a handsome and lucrative man (Stephan & Stephan, 1990). Comic strips, as
well, continue to support the traditional roles of society's women, with illus-
trations of the dutiful wife in the kitchen wearing an apron (Brabant &
Mooney, 1986). Similarly, there continue to be more male characters and
women in children's books continue to engage in primarily traditional female
activities (Kolbe & LaVoi, 1982; Davis, 1984; Purcell & Stewart, 1990). Thus,
it is not surprising that the writing of elementary school children also tends
to include more male characters and that the roles of males are more often
related to ability than are those of women (Trepanier & Romatowski, 1985).

A substantial amount of literature focuses upon the effect of the televi-
sion and magazine or billboard gender portrayals. And, generally, those who
watch television more often tend to have more stereotypical views of gender
(Milkie, 1994). Cahill (1994) argues that children often use "precedents such
as . . . mythical figures like television and movie characters in support of their
definitions" of gender (p. 464). Furthermore, Cahill says children rarely chal-
lenge the authority of these examples. Moreover, because women are infre-
quently depicted solely as professionals, but rather as the supportive wives of
men, as mothers, or as sex objects, there are few mythical figures to discount
the interpretations of children about women and women's roles. What has
been substantiated through research focusing upon gender and play, how-
ever, is that "young girls learn skills, roles, and attitudes that encourage de-
pendency, a lack of exploration and thus result in a deficit in self-expression
and sense of mastery" (Bialeschki, 1990; 53). Moreover, Gerbner et al. (1986)
argue that the view of reality transmitted via the television is far from "value-
free" and is inaccurate with males outnumbering females three to one. Fur-
thermore, they concluded that heavy viewers of television tend to perceive
women as limited with regard to their abilities and interests as compared to
men. Katz and Boswell (1986) also discovered that although peer group and
parental orientations about gender affected the expectations (such as occu-
pation aspirations) of the children in their sample, the best predictor of these
expectations was the media.

The Mass Media and Violence

The depiction of violence on television has also received tremendous
attention with critics arguing that even in 1968 the average American child

would witness 13,000 murders before reaching the age of 16 (Merriam, 1968). In addition, the average four-to-eight-year-old child will witness 1,000 commercials for war toys and 250 cartoon episodes depicting war (Radecki, 1990). Debate has focused upon the possible effects of viewing this violence on children. Many believe that the research results are inconclusive. However, evidence seems to show more support for the stimulation theory that proposes that viewing such episodes increases the likelihood that an individual will subsequently commit a violent act rather than the catharsis theory that argues that viewing violence actually eliminates tendencies toward violence (Tan, 1981). In fact, Radecki (1990) reports that 75% of the more than 1,000 research studies report finding negative effects associated with exposure to violent television programs. Milkie (1994), for example, argues that the boys in her sample discussed the media images to which they have been exposed with one another. These adolescents emphasized images of sexual aggression and violence and developed a "stereotyped, yet glamorized, version of masculinity" (Milkie, 1994; p. 376). Moreover, gender role stereotyping has been demonstrated to be significantly associated with callousness toward rape (Burt, 1980; Bell, et al., 1992). Herman (1989) argues that this is the result of how American culture has eroticized male dominance. Thus, the concept of masculinity has come to be associated with sexual aggression. Therefore, she argues that the inevitable result of having a society in which women are in—and expected to be in—positions subordinate to men, is the occurrence and acceptance of rape and sexual aggression.

Video Games as Agents of Socialization

While less research has examined the relationship between video games and violence, Dominick (1984) analyzed the effects of video game and television violence on aggression in teenagers and concluded that there were modest correlations between video game playing and aggression. However, Dominick (1984) reported that, "Videogame violence is abstract and generally consists of blasting spaceships or stylized aliens into smithereens. Rarely does it involve one human being doing violence to another." (p. 138). Therefore, he argues that correlations between video game violence and aggression in teenagers should not be strong. In addition, Valois and his colleagues (1995) reported that there was no significant relationship between television and video exposure and violent behavior among their sample of teens.

While Kestenbaum and Weinstein (1985) reported that aggressive games actually calmed teenagers, Dominick (1984) did find a significant, albeit a moderate, relationship between exposure to video game violence

and aggression in adolescents. Additional studies have further substantiated relationships between exposure to violence in the media and aggressive re-actions in children. Research by Schutte et al. (1988) with a sample of 5-to 7-year-olds discovered that those children who had played a violent video game were more likely to exhibit violent behavior in subsequent "free play". Similarly, Silvern and Williamson (1987) found that 4-to 6-years olds dis-played more violent and less prosocial behavior after playing violent video games. In addition, other forms of violent media presentations have been found to be associated with socially defined negative behavior. For example, Molitor and Hirsch (1994) and Thomas and Drabman (1975) argue that children were more tolerant of "real-life" aggression between others after viewing a violent media presentation.

While most social scientists agree that the agents of socialization, in-cluding the mass media, are responsible for some of the expectations that children develop, most of the attention to this has been given to television portrayal. The debate about television programming has heightened and some stations have even established "hotlines" for parents to call to obtain information about the content of programs to be aired and congressional debates have centered around the inclusion of the "v-chip" in new televi-sions that would enable parents to control the viewing of violent programs by their children. It is unclear, however, if these parents are aware of the content of the video games that their children are playing. In addition, it has been argued that video games, in comparison to television, may have an even greater adverse effect because the child is actively involved as a player rather than as a passive viewer (Scott, 1995).

While research has discovered that other media are important agents of socialization for children, little research has been done with regard to the effects of playing video games for children. Video games have become increasingly more popular and accessible to children. In fact, billions of dollars have been spent on arcade games as well as home video games (Dominick, 1984). Moreover, in a 1982 Gallup Poll, it was discovered that more than 93% of the children in the United States played video games at least sometimes (Dominick, 1984). New systems are created and intro-duced frequently and new games at an even quicker pace. In addition, the development and expansion of second-hand or resale shops for video games has lowered the costs associated with the games creating easier access to them. Moreover, these video games are easily and cheaply rented at most video rental agencies across the country. However, as Wilder, Mackie, and Cooper (1985) note, although video games, like other forms of technology, have been recognized as part of the male world, females have begun to play these games more. Thus, the portrayal of both male and female char-

acters inevitably affects the expectations of boys and girls with respect to gender roles.

While the debate about the salience of video games as agents of socialization continues, the current research focuses on the content of the video games that today's youth are playing. The focus of this project is to describe the portrayal of females and the use of violence in a sample of Nintendo and Sega Genesis games that were popular in the spring of 1995.

METHODOLOGY

The Sample

The sample of video games chosen for analysis for this project is intentionally nonrandom. It was determined that a purposive sample of the most popular games would provide the best picture of what the children actually are playing. The number of games that are available is vast. Thus, it was determined that a sample of the most popular games would include those that would be most likely to influence children.

In order to draw the sample, four stores that rented video games and two stores that sold video games were contacted in the spring of 1995. A list of their ten most popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis games, in order, were requested. In addition, the January issue of a popular video game magazine, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, ranked the most popular titles as well. Numeric values were assigned to each game based upon the place in the list where the game appeared. All of the scores were then entered into a spreadsheet and the scores added together. Because many of the games appeared on the lists of more than one store, the scores ranged up to a high of 44. The seventeen most popular Nintendo titles and the sixteen most popular Sega Genesis titles were selected for the final content analysis.

Data Collection

After obtaining the sample, each of these video games was rented and played and the instruction booklets that accompany them were read. Content analysis was used to collect information about the portrayal of women and the use of violence in the video games. Prior to viewing the video games, a coding sheet was developed that allowed the researcher to note whether or not female characters were in the video and whether or not violence was a part of the theme or strategy of the game. In order to evaluate the roles of women in the game, the following categories were created a priori: no female characters at all, female characters portrayed as sex

objects or prizes (based upon physical appearance such as wearing revealing clothing or body shape, or characterizations including women leaving with the male winner), females as the victim (based upon women who had been kidnapped or assaulted as part of the plot), females as the hero (based upon whether or not there were female characters who were or could be the action character and winner of the game) and females in feminine roles (based upon appearance, such as wearing pink, long dresses and the like, and characterization, such as playing supportive roles to men). Interestingly, most of the characters in the games were Anglo.

Using the previously discussed coding sheet, each game was evaluated. Games were noted for their depictions of female characters. These categories included games with no characters, characters presented as animals and with no human characteristics, no female characters at all, women portrayed as sex symbols or a prize, women portrayed as victims, and women who were heroes or action characters. In addition, detailed descriptions of the roles played by the female characters were obtained as well as notations about the physical appearance of the women. In a similar fashion the use of violent themes was also evaluated using a coding sheet as well as the noting of detailed descriptions about the object of the game and the use of violence. Each game was noted as having no violence or aggression; socially acceptable aggression, defined as the use of aggression in controlled environments and in situations in which society expects aggression (namely, sports games); violence directed at women; and violence directed at others.

FINDINGS

Table I categorizes the manners in which females were depicted in each of the video games. Of the thirty-three video games included in this sample, only 15% (5) portrayed women as heroes or as action characters. However, one might note that in many instances these heroes were dressed in stereotypical female colors and/or clothing. For example, the female power rangers wear pink and yellow and at the beginning of the game are positioned behind the male power rangers. Similarly, the hero princess in Super Mario 2 (1988) is wearing a long, pink dress and a tiara atop her long hair. Meanwhile, the female fighters in Mortal Kombat II (1994) are wearing thigh boats, gloves, and revealing leotards while their faces are hidden by "harem masks". In all of these instances, there are fewer female heroin characters than males.

The most common portrayal of women was actually the complete absence of women at all. The games Tetris (1985), Sonic and Knuckles (1994), The Lion King (1994), Ecco The Dolphin (1994), and Mickey Mania (1994)

Table I. Characteristics of Video Games

Name	Type of Game	Portrayal of Women	Violent Content[a]
Adventures of Bayou Billy	Nintendo	4, 7	11, 12
Base Wars	Nintendo	3	10
Blades of Steel	Nintendo	3	10
Double Dragon	Nintendo	2, 5,	11, 12
Dr. Mario	Nintendo	3	9
Earthworm Jim	Sega	2, 5, 7	10, 12
King of the Ring	Nintendo	7	10
Lion King	Sega	4	9
Madden 95	Sega	2, 7	10
MegaMan3	Nintendo	3	12
Mickey Mania	Sega	3	12
Mighty Morphin Power Rangers	Sega	2	8, 12
Mortal Kombat2	Sega	2, 7	8, 11, 12
Mutant League Hockey	Sega	4	10
NBA Jam	Sega	3	10
NBA Live 95	Sega	3	10
NFL 95	Sega	3	10
NFL Quarterback Club	Sega	3	10
NHL 95	Sega	3	10
Paper Boy 2	Nintendo	2, 5, 7	11
PGA Golf Tour III	Sega	3	9
Ren and Stimpy	Nintendo	4	12
Road Rash	Sega	2	12
Sonic and Knuckles	Sega	4	12
Sonic the Dolphin	Sega	4	9
Super Mario 2	Nintendo	2	12
Super Mario 3	Nintendo	6	12
Super Tecmo Bowl	Nintendo	3	10
Tetris	Nintendo	1	9
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles	Nintendo	5	11, 12
Tiny Toons	Nintendo	7	8, 11, 12
X-Men	Nintendo	2	12
Zelda	Nintendo	5	12

[a]No characters; women portrayed as heroes; no women characters; no human characters; women portrayed as victims; women portrayed in traditional roles/appearance; women portrayed as sex symbol; women portrayed as evil; non-violent; socially sanctioned aggression (in context of sports, for example); violence directed toward women; violence directed toward others.

have no human characters at all but several games did have human characters, but no female characters. In ten of the videos that have characters, there were no women. Thus, 30% of the videos did not represent the female population at all (Base Wars, 1991; Dr. Mario, 1990; Ren and Stimpy, 1993; Mega Man 3, 1990; Blades of Steel, 1985; PGA Golf Tour III, 1994; NHL 95, 1994; NFL Quarterback Club, 1994; NFL 95, 1994; and Mutant League Hockey, 1994).

The second most common portrayal of women in this sample of games was the woman as the victim or as the proverbial "Damsel in Distress".

Women were portrayed in this manner 21% of the time (N= 7). In three of these cases, the female victim was the princess of a kingdom. In other instances, the female victim was presented as a friend of the hero or as a woman being victimized by a gang of undesirable "brutes".

In one example, The Adventures of Bayou Billy (1989), the beginning of the video game shows a woman in a low-cut, red dress. This woman has large, well-rounded breasts. A man is holding her and has a knife placed at her throat. Apparently, this man has kidnapped Annabelle and Billy's mission is to save her. In another similar example, Double Dragon (1985), a woman, also depicted with large breasts and wearing a mini-skirt, is walking down the street when a man hits her, knocking her down on the sidewalk. He subsequently throws her over his shoulder and carries her away. Once again, the goal of the game is to fight your way through the stages of the game to rescue her.

Other examples of this victim or damsel in distress depiction include the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1990) in which the Ninjas' friend April is standing in a room screaming and crying when the Ninja Turtle finally saves her. Moreover, this type of scene is prevalent in those games that appear to be especially appealing to the youngest players. This is found in the 1991 version of Tiny Toon in which the characters all take the form of cartoon characters. In this video game, Babs the Bunny has been kidnapped and needs to be rescued. Babs has large lips and seductive, droopy eyelids. In addition, the object of the video game Zelda is also to save the princess.

In other instances, women are shown as visions of beauty with large breasts and thin hips. This is the case with football games Tecmo Super Bowl (1993) and Madden 95 (1994) as well as King of the Ring (1991), a pro-wrestling game. The cheerleaders in Tecmo Super Bowl and the women in the parade after the championship game in Madden 95 as well as the female audience members in the wrestling game are shown wearing skimpy clothing. While there is a female paper carrier in Paper Boy 2 (1992), it is important to note that the video game also presents women in less than an egalitarian light. Not only is the title of the game itself exclusionary of women, but there is also a young woman in the game wearing a bikini, suntanning in her yard. Incidentally, the paper carrier will score points if he/she is able to hit this young woman with a paper.

Unexpectedly, another characterization of women arose after data collection commenced. Women were also portrayed as evil or as obstacles to the goal of the game. In Tiny Toon (1991), for example, there is a female character who represents an obstacle to the goal. Elmyra can be found throughout the maze. When she appears she tries to hug the hero, resulting in the hero being sent back to the beginning of the game to start over. Elmyra appears as the evil seductress who might try to lure the male away from his

responsibilities, and when successful, results in his failure and demotion back to the beginning of the game. Moreover, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers (1994) has a female villain, Rita Repulsa, who is wearing a long dress with a medieval headdress. Her accomplice, Madam Woe, is also dressed in a long, frilly dress. Both of these, as their names imply, are evil and unattractive. Similarly, there are female villains in other games as well.

Finally, in many instances the females depicted in the games were in fairly non-significant roles, which also effectively demonstrates the disparate value of males and females in society. In five games, women were portrayed only as spectators or in other roles that were supportive to the male character. While most of the sports games had reporters or commentators, only one (Madden 95, 1994) had a female reporter. In one other example, Road Rash (1992), there is a female police officer. However, this woman, O'Conner, is frequently unable to complete the duties of her job because she wants to go watch *Oprah*.

Overall, in this sample of video games, while there are instances in which female characters are portrayed as positive role models, in general most of the games minimize the roles of females. To begin, many of the games neglect to include women as characters at all. Furthermore, when female characters were depicted they were often presented as dependent upon men (such as victims) or in supporting roles to men. Women were also frequently presented as sex objets or were depicted as contributing less than men.

The evaluation of this sample of video games also reveals that many of the games incorporated violence as a major component of the game. The games were reviewed to determine whether or not aggression or violence was part of the game and if so, if it was a socially acceptable or normal form of aggression such as that found in sports, or if it was directed specifically at women. While most of the perpetrators of violence in this sample were male, this was not the case in all games. For example, there are female villains in Mortal Kombat 2 (1994) and Might Morphin Power Rangers (1994). Seven of the games (21%) were rated as non-violent (Tetris, 1985, The Lion King, 1994; Ecco, the Dolphin, 1994; Dr. Mario, 1990; PGA Golf Tour III, 1994; NBA Jam, 1994; and NBA Live 95, 1994).

The remaining 79% of the games included some type of aggression or violence, ranging from aggression found in sports games to criminal victimization. Nine (27%) of the games included aggression in a sporting event. These included primarily football (Tecmo Super Bowl, 1993; Madden 95, 1994; NFL Quarterback Club, 1994; and NFL 95, 1994) and hockey (Blades of Steel, 1985; NHL 95, 1994; and Mutant League Hockey, 1994) games as well as one pro-wrestling game (King of the Ring, 1991) and one baseball game (Base Wars, 1991).

Twenty-one percent of the games (N = 7) included some form of aggression or violence directed specifically at women. Typically these included the violent victimization of a woman that began the game. For example, in the Adventures of Bayou Billy (1989), a woman is attacked with a knife and kidnapped creating the object of the game—to save her. Similarly, in Double Dragon (1985) a woman is attacked on the street and kidnapped. Once again, the mission of the game is to save her. Other examples include the abduction of the princess in Zelda (1985) and of April (the Ninja Turtles' friend) in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1990). In addition to these games that are marketed to a more advance player, the game Tiny Toon (1991) is specifically recommended for younger players. This game, too, is based upon the idea that Babs, the Bunny, has been kidnapped and must be saved. Even those games that are not based upon violence often have violent components. For example, one way for the paper carrier in Paper Boy 2 (1992) to earn points is to throw a paper and hit a woman who is sunbathing.

Finally, nearly half of the games (N = 16) were found to have violence or aggression directed specifically at other characters. These games typically involved some type of fighting, however, several included aggressive activities that were directed at non-human like characters. For example, the action character might be required to shoot dragons or ghosts (Zelda, 1985), shoot a bird or kick a mushroom (Super Mario 2, 1988; Super Mario 3, 1990), or knock another object off the path (Sonic and Knuckles, 1994). This type of aggression, however, was not the norm. Rather, in most instances, the violence was directed at another human-like character and was often quite graphic. For example, Mortal Kombat 2 (1994), the Adventures of Bayou Billy (1989), Double Dragon (1985), Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1990), and Mighty Morphin Power Rangers (1994) were all based on the heroes fighting his way through a series of attacks by other characters. Moreover, Mickey Mania (1994), is a game that was created using scenes from a number of classical Mickey Mouse cartoons and is targeted toward young children. The object of the game is to get through a number of mazes and involves deliberate attacks by characters on Mickey Mouse and his (the player's) subsequent attacks on the character. In addition, Road Rash (1992) is a motorcycle race. However, the riders attack one another in an attempt to knock them off their bike, thereby, temporarily removing them from the competition.

DISCUSSION

The 33 video games examined in this content analysis represent the most popular titles in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. Among the entire

sample, more than half ignored female representations altogether. Further-
more, if one combines this lack of representation together with examples
such as depictions of "Princess What's Her Name", these games demon-
strate the value, or lack of, given to women in this society. In most other
cases, women were portrayed as victims or as sex objects, but rarely as a
positive role model for young girls and boys. At the same time, even though
male characters were often presented as heroes, there were usually depic-
tions of males as violent perpetrators as well.

This project illustrates that the portrayal of female characters in popu-
lar video games is overwhelmingly stereotypical when they are presented
at all. Furthermore, the females portrayed in these games, even when they
occupy the role of a hero, are often depicted as subordinate to male char-
acters or are presented in terms of their sexuality. It may be argued that
even though these female characters are depicted as primary characters,
they represent negative role models of women at the same time, teaching
that the contributions of women are somehow subordinate to, or less im-
portant than, those of men. These depictions of women are detrimental to
both girls and boys inasmuch as both may internalize these expectations
and accept the idea that women are to be viewed as weak, as victims, and
as sex objects. Furthermore, both girls and boys may come to believe that
the contributions of women in everyday life are less important than those
of men. Indeed, the effects of the internalization of this ideology may be
most prominent upon the socialization of boys because they may be more
likely to play the games more frequently.

In addition, a vast majority of the games utilize some type of violent
themes. These range from blatant attacks upon women followed by sub-
sequent violence by the heroes against the attackers to seemingly inconse-
quential attacks upon animated characters in children's videos. These
illustrations create an illusion that violence and victimization are normal
components of society and in many cases that this behavior is amusing and
fun. In other cases, because these games require the use of violence in
order to advance through the stages of the game, it can be argued that
they give the impression that violence is an effective and preferable method
of problem-solving and for the advancement through the stages of life.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the project was to analyze the content of popular video
games for their presentation of gender roles and violent themes. Applying
the arguments of Mead (1934), symbolic interaction takes place through a
variety of relationships which in turn affect the child's expectations about

women's roles and men's roles. Whether or not the child accepts the iden-
tity that is presented to her/him will be contingent upon of variety of factors
including those identities she/he already identifies, a personal evaluation
of the identity that is contingent upon the perspective of society, since the
child's perspective is molded by that of the generalized other, and the de-
gree to which there is consensus between the identities presented.

In reflecting upon the gender socialization of the child, one might con-
clude that the child learns very early from various agents what is expected
from females and what is expected of males. Moreover, traditional gender
roles are expected and rewarded. Therefore, the argument may be made
that because a child is presented with gender role expectations very early
in the socialization process and socially appropriate behaviors are rewarded,
a favorable evaluation of traditional identities is likely. Moreover, there is
a tremendous diversity of agents and similar messages sent by numerous
agents serve to reinforce the original message.

This project illustrates the overwhelming tendency to neglect to por-
tray female characters at all or to portray them in stereotypical traditional
female roles. In many instances within these games women are depicted
as helpless victims of ruthless men or as sex objects. Some may argue that
video games are not accurate representations of gender behavior. However,
one may extend the discussion asserted by Goffman (1979) in his discussion
of gender advertisements to video games. Goffman asserts that gender ad-
vertisements, when understood as pictures, are not viewed as unnatural,
but rather as acceptable within the context of the situation − as an adver-
tisement. Thus, even if the child accepts the notion that video games are
not real, he or she may still not challenge the ideas and characterizations
presented in them. Thus, the child may be more likely to accept the tra-
ditional views of women found in these video games.

In conclusion, video games, like the television and other forms of mass
media, have become agents in the development of identities in children. It
is apparent from the results of this project that the traditional woman de-
picted in video games is the most popular role of women in video games
are stereotypical and traditional in nature. Applying the theory of Mead
(1934), it is argued that these characterizations may have a real effect upon
the attitudes of children toward women and relationships and their expec-
tations about behavior. As the child identifies with the traditional feminine
or masculine role, she or he begins to expect certain behavior from females
and males in society. These portrayals, then, have the propensity for nega-
tively affecting the attitudes of both males and females toward women. Sub-
sequently, the effects of possible negative attitudes may adversely affect
the ability of women to ever attain gender equality with men. As evidenced
in the words of Bialeschki (1990), "By conforming to gender role expecta-

tions, young girls restrict their own potential because so many important skills and activities have been designated as 'inappropriate' for them" (54). Likewise, while girls may come to view the roles of women to be limited, so may boys. Boys may learn that the acceptable roles of women include being dependent, subordinate, weak, and supportive of men's roles. Thus, they also may come to view male-female interaction as limited with men performing the roles of protector, supervisor, and perhaps victimizer of women.

Moreover, the link between other forms of violent media representations and violence has demonstrated the potential harmful effects of consistent exposure to violence on children. This has profound implications for a society already characterized by high levels of violence. The available literature has been unable to provide adequate support for either the argument that media violence negatively affects individual aggression or the argument that is does not. However, it is important to note that most of the research projects that have been conducted on the actual effects of media violence on behavior of children have included small, often unrepresentative samples, and unique examples of media violence. Nevertheless, most researchers have concluded that media violence may have an adverse effect on at least a small group of individuals. It has been argued that exposure to violence via video games may only be related to negative outcomes among a small percentage of children who are more vulnerable and more impressionable (Lande, 1993). Nevertheless, the consequences of this are significant even if only for a minority. Thus, in order to substantiate the degree to which these presentation are internalized and to evaluate the negative consequences associated with exposure to them, additional research that emphasizes both short-term and long-term attitudinal and behavioral differences in children following exposure must be conducted.

This research supports the thesis that popular video games emphasize the use of violence as a problem-solving technique. Furthermore, this research refutes the argument of Dominick (1984). While the earliest generations of video games may have consisted primarily of "blasting spaceships and stylized aliens into smithereens" (Dominick, 1984, p. 138). The video games in this popular sample involved, in large part, violence directed specifically toward other human characters. Furthermore, because video games are somewhat different from television and other media forms inasmuch as they involve more interaction on the part of the child, researchers should be cautious in minimizing the effects of exposure to video games based upon generalizations from research on other media forms. In addition, the popularity and accessibility of video games is a fairly recent phenomenon and the research that has been conducted on the effects of video game exposure has focused on the short-term effects. Consequently,

it is unclear what long-term effects and what effects from long-term expo-sure to the presentations will result. Thus, given that the current genre of video games presents characteristically stereotypical views of women and that violence appears to be a major theme, it is important that empirical research be conducted to discover what, if any, long-term effects emerge from this new agent of socialization.

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